WHY SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FAILED

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Why Sustainable Tourism Failed

When I wrote my book ‘Sustainable Tourism Management’ in 1999 there was a great deal of optimism around the emerging concept of sustainable tourism and our ability to make it a reality.

Optimism in the early days of the sustainable tourism movement

It felt to many as if tourism was ‘coming of age’ as we first began to leave behind the simplistic and superficial ideas of the 1990’s such as ‘green tourism’ or ‘soft tourism, and then started to see tourism in the context of the broader debate over global sustainable development as a whole.

There had been a slow but steadily growing awareness of the negative impacts of tourism for a number of years due to the work of authors such as Young (1973), Doxey (1975) and Mathieson and Wall (1982). This body of work was added to constantly throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s, usually in the form of case studies based upon individual destinations.

And at the same time, we were seeing an increasing number of critiques of the idea that tourism was some kind of magic bullet that could solve the social and economic problems of regions or even whole countries. The first of these influential critiques was probably the work of De Kadt et al published in 1979. Interest in this topic increased particularly in relation to so-called developing countries, most notably perhaps through a book entitled ‘Tourism and the Less Developed Countries which was edited by Harrison in 1992.

There are two things that are really striking about this growing literature around the negative impacts of tourism.

The first is just how long it took for the ideas of these authors to start to influence thinking in governments and the tourism industry.

The second point one notices is that most of the early work offered sound and insightful analysis of the problems caused by tourism but seemed light on suggestions for any positive action that could be taken to address the problems. This may partly explain why the literature largely failed to stimulate a significant response from both industry and governments.

However, by 1999 when the author was writing his book about sustainable tourism, there had been not only a recognition that something needed to be done about the negative impacts of tourism, but the first steps were being taken towards finding ways of tackling them. And these steps were being framed usually together under the banner of sustainable tourism. As a result, the new millennium dawned with a flurry of initiatives and apparent evidence that the world, or at least the tourism world, was serious about implementing sustainable tourism.

A ground-breaking industry-led project, the International Hospitality Environmental Initiative was encouraging the hospitality industry globally to behave more sustainably by providing practical advice and disseminating good practice. At the same time, plans were being put in place for the launch of the Tour Operators Initiative which saw a number of travel companies which took millions of tourists on vacation across the world start to
embrace the principles of sustainable tourism through activities designed to maximise the benefits and reduce the negative impacts of tourism in destinations.

Meanwhile, academics were publishing dozens of books and papers every year relating to sustainable tourism and by the early 1990’s there was already a Journal of Sustainable Tourism. Researchers were suggesting that more and more tourists were interested in taking vacations that were more ethical and sustainable. It therefore appeared that developing sustainable tourism was what consumers wanted to see happen so presumably their purchase decisions would reflect that fact?

And, of course, by the first years of the new millennium the United Nations World Tourism Organisation and national and regional governments were drawing up sustainable tourism policies and strategies for destinations across the world and holding endless conferences on the subject.

The birth of responsible tourism

At the same time though and in parallel to these developments we were seeing the beginning of the responsible tourism movement which took a rather different approach while still wanting to see tourism become more sustainable.

The concept of responsible tourism is based on the idea that tourism can only be made more sustainable if everyone takes responsibility for doing what they can to make a difference rather than leaving everything to national governments and the United Nations. It believes that tourism will only be made better if the tourism industry, tourists, destination management organisations, local communities, and the media, as well as governments and the UN, take the actions they are able to in order to make tourism more sustainable. It was, and still is, about incremental change based on locally generated initiatives rather than grandiose strategies and centralised decision-making.

In 1999, as I was writing my book setting out my perspective on making tourism more sustainable, a group of people were establishing the Responsible Tourism Partnership (RTP) which brought together people from different sectors of tourism and different countries to work together to make tourism better.

Just before the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in late 2002 the RTP organised a major event attended by two hundred and eighty people from across the world of tourism which resulted in the signing of the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism. This in many ways represented the birth of responsible tourism as a movement.

At the time of writing, in autumn 2022, we are commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism which seems like a perfect time to review the current state of play in relation to sustainable tourism while recognising that as noted above responsible tourism and sustainable tourism are not the same thing although they are clearly related, of course.
The title of this current piece expresses the author’s clear opinion that the concept of sustainable tourism, in the way it has been pursued, has largely been a failure to date. It has remained an idea, a concept, with too much emphasis on the theory of it rather than on practical actions that might help make it a reality, too much tokenism and ‘greenwashing’ and not enough radical and fundamental change.

**The three main flaws in sustainable tourism thinking**

It has been my contention from when I first wrote the book in 1999 that the concept of sustainable tourism as it developed was flawed from the beginning in a number of ways, the three most significant of which I will briefly highlight now.

1) **Placing too much faith in national governments and supra-governmental organisations**

Perhaps the most serious flaw was its focus on a top-down approach based on the idea that sustainable tourism would be achieved through supra-governmental organisations and national governments taking the lead with their policies, laws, and spending. It was taken for granted that these bodies would have the political will to implement sustainable tourism even though it would require radical changes in the behaviour of both the tourist industry and its customers, the tourists. In reality, and not at all surprisingly, politicians whose decisions tend to be based on short-term thinking and focused on the date of the next election have been reluctant to implement unpopular actions aimed at achieving long-term goals that might cost them votes in the short-term.

The other problem with relying particularly on supra-governmental bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union to implement sustainability is that such organisations work on the principal of the ‘lowest common denominator’. In other words, any policy declaration normally needs to be supported by every member government which means that often documents have to be ‘watered down’ and huge compromises made to get every government on board. That often leads to documents which are vague and lacking in concrete actions or definite timescales which is the opposite of what is required given the climate crisis as well as some of the other urgent challenges we face in the tourism sector.

2) **Seeing sustainable tourism as a technocratic challenge rather than a political issue**

The author believes that the second major flaw in how the concept of sustainable tourism developed was the belief that achieving it was a technocratic rather than a political challenge. This may well reflect the fact that the moment it is accepted that sustainable tourism is a political challenge it becomes more difficult to find consensus on a way forward when one is relying on a top-down approach led by supra-governmental bodies such as the United Nations. However, the failure to recognise that it is an inherently political issue as it is about the distribution of resources and costs and benefits, in which some gain and others lose is most disappointing. At best this failure looks to be the result of patronising and elitist thinking while at worst it can be seen as anti-democratic.

These two issues will be discussed in a little more detail later. Suffice it to say at this point that both of these flaws appear to be the result of thinking that has been rather naïve.
While such naivety may have been understandable when sustainable tourism was a newly emerging concept all those years ago it should not have continued for so long in the face of so much evidence that both assumptions were simply wrong.

3) Sustainable tourism as a destination rather than a journey

The third major reason why sustainable tourism to date has been a disappointing failure is the practice of talking about sustainable tourism as a final destination that we could reach rather than seeing it as a continuous journey to a destination that would probably always remain frustratingly just out of reach.

This idea of sustainable tourism as a destination rather than a journey also seems naïve given that the world is constantly changing with new unforeseen issues arising all the time as we have seen only too clearly in recent years.

At the same time, the broader debate about sustainability and sustainable development as a whole has itself moved on so much in recent decades in ways which have implications for sustainable tourism.

The highly influential Brundtland report, ‘Our Common Future’, a piece of work produced by experts focusing on global sustainable development, made little or no mention of either climate change or tourism. At that time the threat of climate change was not really recognised or understood while the tourism industry was not thought important enough to be discussed in relation to sustainable development. The report instead focused on important but long recognised issues such as poverty in developing countries, population growth, food security, and the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation.

The Rio Summit of 1992 was seen as a watershed and seemed to many to be ground-breaking at the time. It produced a Declaration on Environment and Development, but it also resulted in Agenda 21, a plan to tackle some major environmental challenges though not climate change. It also focused on the rights of women and child poverty, both important issues of course. But again, there was no mention in a three-hundred-and-fifty-page document of the role which tourism could and should play in sustainable development which was a pity as tourism is potentially relevant to both the role of women and the alleviation of child poverty if managed in the right way.

Ten years later, in 2002, the UN organised the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Plan of Implementation which was the main outcome of the event included many important points about issues such as HIV, water resources, and biodiversity, but it failed to recognise the impact of tourism and how it represented a barrier to sustainable development in the way in which it was operating. Again, there was no mention of climate change.

The publication just before the Summit of the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism was an attempt by enlightened figures in the tourism sector to help show the potential link between tourism and sustainable development.
The point of mentioning these three major reports and conferences is not to criticise them necessarily but to show that the key issues have changed dramatically so that now climate change, which none of them considered, is the number one crisis we face. In other words, we are now living in a totally different world and time to that which provided the context for the development of the concept of sustainable tourism.

These three examples also illustrate the fact that despite its size and impact tourism has never really been given the attention it deserves in the broader debates about global sustainability.

Until a few years ago, sustainable development, of which sustainable tourism is simply a part, seemed to be about good stewardship of the earth and social equity, and appeared to be recognised as a long-term aspiration. Today, it has turned into an urgent battle for survival for the planet and its inhabitants as the climate change crisis threatens the very future of the whole world.

Within the tourism field specifically we are also grappling with issues which were largely unknown or unrecognised when the idea of sustainable tourism first appeared including everything from plastic pollution to the refugee crisis, the huge increase in cruise tourism to animal welfare, the war in Ukraine to the Covid pandemic, the impact of social media to widespread mental health issues amongst populations around the world!

Sustainable tourism thinking has, I believe, simply failed to keep pace with the changes which have taken place in our world.

If sustainable tourism is still to be seen as a destination then all of the changes and challenges outlined above mean that it is probably as far away today, if not further away, than it was back in the 1990’s!

**The lack of critical thinking**

Based on the three flaws in how sustainable tourism has developed identified above it seems that the concept of sustainable tourism has been adversely affected since it first appeared by an apparent unwillingness to critically analyse ideas that have too often been taken at face value, not the least of which was the idea that sustainable tourism was a destination rather than a journey.

Writing back in 1999 the author identified and highlighted this phenomenon which he described as the ‘sacred cows’ of sustainable tourism, ‘ideas that are apparently so widely accepted that they are rarely questioned’. (Swarbrooke 1999)

The fact that this is still happening today is very disappointing given the amount of attention that sustainable tourism has received from academic researchers in particular since that book was published more than twenty years ago.

**Where is the evidence that sustainable tourism has failed?**

It is important before we look in rather more detail at the reasons why sustainable tourism has been a failure I feel that I first need to present the evidence which on which my
contention that it has failed is based. I believe that the following brief outline of some of the evidence will hopefully suffice to make a convincing case in support of my opinion:

- Air travel grew virtually every year from the 1990’s until 2019, and in just eight years from 2010 to 2018 the number of air passengers almost tripled from 1.5 billion to around 4.2 billion, (https://www.databank.org 2018). The year before Covid struck passenger numbers rose another 300 million to reach a record figure of 4.5 billion passengers flying in a single year (https://www.statista.com 2020). It was only economic downturns rather than sustainable tourism concerns that seem to have had any impact on the pace at which air travel increased over the three decades before the pandemic struck.

Despite the widespread news media coverage about the carbon footprint of air travel and its contribution to global warming and all the sustainable tourism policies air travel simply kept growing. A few measures were tried by governments as experiments to try to reduce air travel such as the use of taxation, but most were either short-lived and/or had little impact. Instead in most cases where they remain they have simply become a useful source of extra revenue for governments.

Ironically, Covid, a virus that was spread by travel and tourism, in just a few weeks, did what decades of sustainable tourism policies and strategies had failed to do, when it led to an almost total cessation of international air travel.

But even as Covid was still affecting millions around the world air travel began to resume its previous upward trajectory. In 2022, estimates suggested that air travel would have already reached the level of 3.4 billion passengers despite Covid, a figure that would have itself been a record number of passengers every year up until 2015. The industry now seems intent on getting back all the passengers it lost during the pandemic and then continuing to grow air travel beyond 2019 levels.

One of the few tangible positives in relation to air travel in recent years was the introduction in France in 2019 of a ban on domestic flights between destinations which could be reached in two-and-a-half hours or less by train. Given France has the high-speed TGV train operating between its major cities this is a significant development affecting a number of inter-urban journeys in the country. While it may not have any discernible effect on the carbon footprint of air travel globally it may hopefully serve as a model for other countries.

At the same time the airline industry is pursuing the goal of carbon-free air travel as a solution to its contribution to climate change and its negative environmental impacts. And progress is clearly being made with SAF (Sustainable Aviation Fuels), and the possible use of solar energy and hydrogen to power the airliners of the future. The UK believes that domestic air travel could be carbon-free by 2040 and Sweden has suggested that their domestic flights could be carbon-free ten years earlier. Unfortunately, the highest carbon footprint comes from international rather than domestic flights. However, the representative body for all airlines in 2021 adopted a target of zero carbon air travel worldwide by 2050. (https://www.iata.org 2021) And this is an aspiration based on technological developments that are yet to be fully tested let alone costed. So, while
progress is being made it may well come too late given the urgency of the climate emergency we face.

- The cruise industry saw an incredible increase in passenger numbers up until Covid struck. By 1970 there were only 500,000 cruise passengers globally and many were forecasting the demise of the cruise industry. (Baker, 2016). However, the sector successfully reinvented itself and entered a boom period. From the early days of the sustainable tourism movement in the 1990’s cruise passenger numbers grew from around 3 million to a peak of over 29.7 million in 2019 (Cruise Lines International Association 2019). While the critics of tourism focused on air travel the cruise sector was largely under their radar and was booming until then. At the same time, belatedly, attention has begun to be paid for the first time to the negative impacts of cruising such as its carbon footprint and pollution as well as its questionable human resources policies.

Like air travel cruising was decimated by Covid in 2020 falling to an estimated 5.8 million cruise passengers in that year. And the media was full of images of passengers being held on board cruise ships where the virus was rampant while some governments obviously saw these ships as floating ‘super-spreaders’ of Covid. Sadly, dozens of cruise passengers did not live long enough to complete their cruises and return home after falling victim to Covid.

However, despite all the bad publicity passenger numbers were already rising rapidly again in 2021 at a time when Covid was still a threat globally. Even the most pessimistic forecasts suggest that cruise passenger numbers will be exceeding the record levels of 2019 by 2024 at the latest. (Cruise Lines International Association 2022) Other forecasts suggest that there will be more than 32 million cruise passengers by 2026 and that already looks as if it could be an underestimate! (https://statista.com 2022)

Unfortunately, it is not only the volume of cruise passengers which is a problem in terms of the sustainability of tourism, but the destinations visited by the cruise ships also represent a challenge. As cruise passengers become more experienced they look for new destinations and the cruise companies have responded by offering cruises to remote destinations, many of which have fragile ecosystems which are vulnerable to damage from cruise ships and large numbers of cruise passengers. For example, it has been reported that around 50,000 cruise passengers visited Antarctica during the 2019-2020 season, the majority of whom actually landed rather than just observing from the deck of their cruise ship (Washington Post 2021)

At the same time cruise ships have reached a size whereby when they arrive in port and the passengers go ashore they overwhelm the local infrastructure and make everyday life more difficult for local residents. Their short stays in the ports of call of just a few hours bring no benefits to local accommodation providers and seem at odds with the ideas of sustainable tourism and maximising the benefits of tourism for the local community. Instead, it feels like exploitation by affluent tourists and global corporations.

Sadly, to date there is little evidence that the cruise industry is taking the idea of sustainable tourism very seriously except for some apparent ‘green washing’ and a few tokenistic gestures.
despite all the talk about the need to promote the use of public transport to reduce the negative environmental impact of travelling by car the fact remains that the vast majority of leisure trips are still made in private vehicles. As early as the 1970’s commentators were talking about the environmental impact of mass car ownership in terms of pollution. Despite these well recognised concerns records show that there were estimated to be 500-600 million cars in the world in the year 2000 in the early days of the sustainable tourism movement. However, within twenty years that number had almost trebled to an estimated 1.446 billion by 2021-2022 of which 532 million were in Asia, 405 million in Europe and 361 million in North America. (https://www.hedgescompany.com 2021).

This rise in car ownership and the use of private motor vehicles for leisure trips has often resulted in a reduction in bus and rail services from major centres of population to tourist destinations. Of course, this a vicious circle for as the number of services declines and fares rise the private car becomes an even more attractive option for travellers.

It was estimated that in 2015 65% of domestic tourism trips within the EU were made by car compared to just 17% by public transport (https://www.ec.europa.eu 2017). At a local level in Cornwall in the UK it has been estimated that in 2016 82% of domestic visitors arrived by private car compared to 74% just six years earlier in 2010 while the proportion arriving on public transport fell from the figure of just 7% to an all-time low of just 5%. (https://www.visitcornwall.com 2022)

In turn this increasing use of the car causes disruptive congestion and pollution in the tourist destinations themselves, so they become just like the places where the tourists have chosen to travel from ‘to get away from it all’!

This is particularly true in those destinations which are now much loved by tourists but are rarely served by trains or buses including remote rural areas and high mountain ranges. Often the most pristine environments these are likely to see the highest proportions of visits by private cars rather than public transport.

The situation concerning how tourists travel to and within their chosen destinations has been made worse in recent years by the rapid increase in ‘fly-drive’ holidays involving air travel to a destination and then hiring a car or campervan or recreational vehicle to explore further afield. These trips can involve driving hundreds or even several thousand miles, in the USA and Australia for example, giving these tourists a very large per capita carbon footprint.

Before Covid many communities were so concerned about the level of tourism the types of tourism and the behaviour of the tourists in the places in which they lived that they began to protest. In 2017 in Palma de Mallorca posters appeared on walls saying ‘Tourists=Terrorists’ and ‘Tourism kills the city’. In the same year there were mass demonstrations in Barcelona and graffiti appeared including ‘Refugees welcome, tourists go home!’ And in the same year 2,000 residents protested in Venice about the impact of mass tourism. There were reports of isolated examples of tourist buses being vandalised and tourists hassled. In November 2017 tourism interests were so concerned about these
protests that the United Nations World Tourism Organisation called a summit on the subject in London in November 2017 to coincide with the staging of World Travel Market.

Protests continued in 2018 and 2019 in cities such as Berlin, Prague, Budapest, and Amsterdam. At the same time, while it did not start as an organised movement a number of organisations sprang up which saw it as a potentially important political movement based on citizen activism.

And it seemed that two factors in particular were causing this discontent. First, were the cruise ships disgorging vast numbers of tourists who swamped neighbourhoods in places like Venice, Dubrovnik, and Barcelona? There were protests against the building of a new cruise terminal in Barcelona and in 2020 there were protests in Venice about allowing cruise ships into the centre of the city triggered by an accident to one of these cruise ships

Second, were the cities where people felt that tourism and the Airbnb phenomenon were causing higher rents and evictions of local residents as property owners sought to exploit the opportunity to make more money by renting their property to tourists? This was a cause of protests and opposition to tourism in places such as Amsterdam and Berlin.

If anyone believed that overtourism was just a European phenomenon they would have been disappointed to read reports during 2022 of local antipathy towards the effects of large-scale tourism in Mexico City, Hawaii, and the Lake Tahoe area in the USA, for example.

Indeed, it could be easily argued that if the populations of relatively affluent European cities felt they were being exploited and harmed by tourism then the populations of less affluent parts of the world that attract large numbers of tourists might have an even stronger case for claiming they were suffering from ‘overtourism. Sadly, most of them either lack a voice or at least a voice that the tourists can hear!

In many instances the great reduction in tourism caused by Covid may have temporarily at least taken away some of the raison d’etre of the overtourism movement. And, in any event, people had more urgent priorities as the pandemic ravaged lives and communities.

Ironically though the restrictions on international travel caused a big increase in domestic tourism in some countries, the so-called ‘staycation boom’. This in itself caused problems in those rural and coastal areas that were already popular with tourists and found themselves overwhelmed by the extra demand. In the UK this was seen in places like Wales and Cornwall, and it led to protests against what was seen as exploitative tourism. Tourists who wanted to be travelling abroad rather than holidaying in their own country often took out their frustration on tourism industry workers. At the same time property owners evicted local tenants and turned their properties into self-catering holiday accommodation or sold them to affluent outsiders as second homes thus worsening the housing situation for the local community.

In general, what happened during Covid simply reinforced the fact that tourism in general seems to have become even more ‘exploitative’ in recent years. The rise of Airbnb and its adverse impact on the housing crisis in many destinations is just one example of this phenomenon.
In Cornwall in the UK local residents also saw an increase in ‘wild camping’ or ‘fly camping’ with people pitching their tents anywhere they liked and then leaving their rubbish and even faeces behind for others to clear up. Those living there also noted a large increase in the use of RV’s (recreational vehicles) and campervans which did not use official sites but instead parked anywhere sometimes blocking the roads so that emergency vehicles were unable to get through. Often those holidaying in them brought their food with them too so that overall, they contributed little to the local economy. While such practices might be understandable to some extent as a reaction to Covid restrictions and lock downs there seems little evidence to date that such behaviours will be disappearing any time soon as Covid recedes as a threat.

Unless local authorities begin to manage tourism more sustainably, as Barcelona is now trying to do, it seems likely that as tourism returns to pre-Covid levels and beyond that the ‘overtourism movement’ will only grow and spread to new destinations.

● there has been little tangible evidence of significant improvements in relation to the well-known issues surrounding employment in tourism. Wages are still low although the labour shortages following Covid may have improved them a little in the short-term but that is unlikely to last.

Many staff still depend on gratuities which are not guaranteed to give them a living wage which can be humiliating for them. It is one of the few industries where tipping is still the norm and where some staff rely on it for 100% of their income, receiving no salary from their employer,

Discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, and disability remains depressingly common with some positions seemingly not being open to some people while in other cases their choice of career may be dictated by their nationality rather than their ability. For example, on United States and European operated cruise ships the senior officers tend to be white and European or American while the cleaning and catering staff will largely be drawn from the low wage economies of Asia in particular.

Many tourism workers around the world are still denied basic human rights such as the right to join a trade union and will be dismissed if they go on strike.

Migrant workers are especially at risk of exploitation as they often feel vulnerable and fear that they may be forced to leave the country if they complain about their working conditions. An increasing number of organisations, most notably the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, are calling attention to the risk that some hospitality employers may consciously or unconsciously find themselves employing people who are the victims of trafficking and/or ‘modern slavery’.

Young workers and student interns are also susceptible to exploitation and bullying in the hospitality sector because of their age or the fact that their future studies may depend on a recommendation from their internship provider.
Casual and seasonal labour remains the norm in many tourist destinations which makes it difficult for workers to either rent or buy a home as they have no all-year-round guaranteed employment.

All of these issues themselves represent a threat to the very sustainability of the tourism industry itself, a sector that is labour intensive, but which seems to behave in ways which make it very difficult for it to attract and retain good staff.

- too much tourism development still involves human rights abuses and the interests of local communities being ignored by governments and entrepreneurs determined to develop tourism at all costs

Poorer residents are still too often evicted and displaced so that the tourism industry can flourish in places where they may have lived for generations. In 2019 Neef published a study based on research commissioned by Tourism Watch. This included more than twenty case studies of such displacement with the culprits including governments, local authorities, entrepreneurs and even in one case, the military! The cases were drawn from many countries including Indonesia, China, the Philippines, Honduras, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, and Cambodia

The needs of the tourism industry for water lead in some countries to water being diverted from local residents to hotels and resorts. Given that tourist destinations are often in places which suffer from water shortages, including the Mediterranean coast of southern Europe. There have been well publicised disputes about the impact of tourism on access to water by local people from India to Mexico for years but after all that time they are still regularly being reported by the media.

These are not new phenomena but there seems to be little evidence that governments and some in the industry have become more sensitive to the rights of local communities and the poorest members of these communities in particular. Such abuse of human rights is surely not compatible with the idea of sustainable tourism under any circumstances.

- Tourism still continues to harm and exploit wildlife at a time when we are facing a global biodiversity crisis. Habitats are destroyed to create tourism infrastructure, endangered species are still being eaten or made into souvenirs, and too many tourist activities continue to be based on the exploitation of wild animals.

One area where some progress has been made is in relation to the practice of encouraging tourists to ride elephants where some operators have removed such activities from their programmes. Yet in spite of a lot of awareness raising on this issue many tourists are still taking elephant rides in a number of countries in Asia including Thailand and Vietnam. Pressure groups claim that these elephants are often captured in the wild and beaten to make them compliant, despite of the fact that they are an endangered species. Increasingly some so-called ‘elephant orphanages’ and ‘elephant sanctuaries’ are being criticised for exploiting the creatures that they purport to be protecting.

We have also seen in recent years a depressing increase in ‘interactive experiences’ between tourists and marine life such as dolphins and sharks. Tourists are being encouraged
to ‘swim with wild dolphins’ all over the world from Egypt to the Galapagos Islands, South Africa to the Azores. Meanwhile, South Africa has become the clear market leader when it comes to ‘swimming with sharks’ experiences, an activity that is supposed to combine wildlife and adventure. Placed within a protective cage the tourists in diving gear are circled by sharks which have been attracted by baits or decoys. Critics claim that this affects shark’s natural behaviour and disturbs their food hunting activities and in the Cayman Islands and Antigua we have Stingray City, an attraction based on interactions with stingrays which are fed to ensure they are present, thus weakening their hunting instinct.

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in whale-watching so that numbers are now well above the 13 million whale-watching trips estimated to have been taken in 2008. Much of this growth has been seen in destinations where, ironically, climate change has changed the migration behaviour of whales so that they are seen in larger numbers than ever before in some places. Less popular and emerging destinations desperate to attract more tourists have rushed to exploit this change in migration patterns to offer whale-watching trips where the activity is either unregulated or where the regulations are rarely enforced. Even tourists taking these trips are sometimes shocked by what happens. In 2016 one tourist who had taken a whale-watching trip at Mirissa in Sri Lanka wrote on TripAdvisor that it was ‘sad to see that most of the whale watching companies completely ignored the simple rules in place to protect the beautiful endangered Blue Whales that we saw today. A group of 6 large boats chased a mother and calf at full speed to try to get as close as possible. The fishermen had absolutely no respect for the animal, charging up and down and scaring the whale into taking short surface breaks. (Swarbrooke 2020)’

This idea of wildlife being exploited for the pleasure of tourists is surely not compatible with the idea of sustainable tourism, yet it continues and in some places is on the increase particularly in relation to marine wildlife. This is surely something which should have disappeared by now if all the years of sustainable tourism thinking and campaigning had been more effective.

A quick perusal of the Internet gives an indication of just some of the tourist ‘experiences’ that are available, most of which developed long after we were all supposed to be embracing the ideas of sustainable tourism. Just two examples will serve to illustrate the point.

First, we have ‘canned hunting’ where animals including lions are bred in captivity to be killed by hunters in enclosed spaces, so the animals have no chance of escaping. South Africa appears to be the centre of this activity although it also exists in relation to indigenous wildlife species in the USA. Second, there are numerous examples where supposedly wild mammals and birds are deliberately lured to a place with food so tourists can photograph them, thus disturbing their normal hunting behaviours and making them dependent on humans. This can involve everything from sea eagles in Malaysia to brown bears in Finland.

We also need to look at the plight of wildlife in captivity and particularly human interactions with wildlife in captivity as well as wildlife ‘performing’ to amuse tourists.
One type of wildlife interaction has become so popular that it has its own name, being labelled ‘selfies with tigers’ tourism’. Thailand appears to be a market leader in this dubious activity where tigers are forced to be part of a selfie taken by tourists. These tigers may be bred in captivity or captured from the wild. These endangered animals need protecting not exploiting. To their credit several social media platforms have now banned such selfies but they are still popular. And some zoos, even those renowned for their conservation work, are not helping as they to offer selfies with certain animals purely to raise money.

In terms of marine wildlife while many countries have now banned the practice whales and dolphins are still being kept in captivity and ‘performing’ for visitors at parks leading tourist destinations in several countries, most notably the USA and Tenerife in Spain.

The author gladly acknowledges that some progress has been made in tackling some of the abuses of wildlife by the tourism industry, but new ones are emerging all the time.

Finally, the rise of so-called ‘ecotourism’, often masquerading as sustainable tourism, is a bigger threat to wildlife than mass market beach tourism. It encourages tourists to go ‘off the beaten track’ on trips where seeing wildlife is the main focus of the holiday. In doing so it takes tourists into fragile environments with wildlife which are vulnerable to the disturbance which tourism inevitably causes in a natural setting. This is a clear case of the need for self-censorship and gratification denial for tourists and the tourism industry. Just because wildlife is there we do not have to go and see it we can just watch it on the many excellent wildlife documentaries on television.

● The growth of volunteering which seems intuitively to be a positive force for good has too often been seen to be something that brings less benefits to the recipients of the services of volunteers than it does to the volunteers themselves who enhance their CVs by volunteering and to the commercial organisations that make money from organising volunteer ‘holidays’.

Even when the motives of volunteers are wholly altruistic there continue to be serious questions about some volunteering experiences that make them seem far removed from the concept of sustainable tourism. While there are certainly examples of responsible volunteering tourism operators doing good work others seem to see volunteering just as a sector of the commercial tourism industry where profit is the main purpose. The projects that volunteers are sent to are not always properly vetted and volunteers are also not often evaluated to ensure they have the skills required by local communities. Short term teaching placements often create a ‘revolving door’ of teachers which is disruptive to the education of already vulnerable children who need stability. And for some unscrupulous people the opportunity to make money from naive trusting young tourists is impossible to resist. This can lead to problems that have been reported in the media in recent years ranging from animals being captured in the wild to be put in ‘reserves’ where volunteers spend time to orphanages where the children are not orphans at all, but their parents have been persuaded that they will have a better life in the orphanage. There is good work going on to try to clean up the volunteer tourism market, but it remains very questionable whether it is really an example of sustainable tourism.
● We have failed to ensure that tourism planning is making tourist destinations resilient in the face of climate change so, for example, we are still seeing tourism infrastructure being developed in areas which are increasingly prone to extreme weather events, coastal flooding and wildfires. In many countries tourism development is still taking place on coasts and estuaries where rising sea levels mean that these areas of development may well be submerged within a decade or two yet building continues. In recent years much attention in this respect has been focused on the ‘sunshine state’ of Florida in the USA where climate change threatens the very future of many communities. Yet tourism and leisure development continues apace with apparently little planning to ensure that coastal communities can withstand the effects of climate change on sea levels and extreme weather events. As an article in The Guardian in 2019 put it succinctly, ‘Florida is drowning. Condos are still being built. Can’t humans see the writing on the wall?’ (The Guardian 2019)

● Too many communities, regions, and even whole countries are still over-dependent on tourism making them highly vulnerable to any downturn in the tourism market that they depend upon. It also means that their future is at the mercy of the whims of tourists, and the decisions of foreign tour operators, airlines, and hotel companies.

Wholly accurate data on the level of economic dependence of countries on tourism is impossible to obtain in reality due to the complexities of measuring economic impacts. However, one source using data for 2020 produced a list of what it claimed to be the top 50 most tourism dependent national economies which made interesting reading. Of the top ten no fewer than nine were island nations – the exception was Belize and four of them were in the Caribbean. This source claimed that as much as 75% of the GDP of the Maldives may come from tourism and that tourism generated more than 50% of all jobs in the Seychelles, the Bahamas and St Lucia. However, three of the top fifty countries were in Europe namely Iceland, Malta, and Croatia. (https://www.stacker.com 2021) It is fair to say these figures are higher than those provided by another source which suggests that the maximum dependence of any country on tourism in terms of GDP is around 40% which is still high. Most other data appear to be somewhere between these two extremes.

And, of course, within countries which overall are not economically dependent on tourism they may well contain regions and municipalities which have a high level of economic dependence on tourism.

Sadly, despite significant evidence to the contrary, there is still a belief amongst many government decision-makers that tourism is still a smooth and desirable route to economic growth and social development. It can certainly work as part of a strategy based on developing a number of industries but often it becomes totally dominant, a form of monoculture which often limits the potential growth of other industries. For example, the demand for water by the tourism industry in arid areas can have an adverse effect on agriculture in particular. And the reputation of hospitality employment being low skilled, seasonal, and casual may well deter inward investment in tourist destinations from businesses that require skilled labour.
There is also still a strong lobby in many destinations arguing for the now rather discredited idea of ‘trickle-down economics’ by which slowly over time the benefits of tourism are supposed to percolate down to the poorest in society. In reality, what often happens instead is that tourism exploits the poorest in society and may even lead to a widening of the disparities between rich and poor.

Sustainable tourism surely means having a balanced economy in which tourism is a part but does not dominate. Where places are over-dependent on tourism there is also the risk that the voice of the tourism industry will drown out other voices particularly those of the poor and those who are not directly involved in the tourism sector.

Interestingly, those places which are over-dependent on tourism are usually poor regions and countries with relatively few economic or geographical advantages and sadly they are also often places which are most at risk from the effects of impact of climate change. That is clearly true of the Maldives for instance which as we noted earlier appear to have the most tourism dependent economy in the world.

The receipts from tourism could help such places develop greater resilience to the effects of climate change but too often instead tourism often undermines this resilience in its search for short-term profits.

However, these destinations, ironically, also stand to lose the most if people in the so-called developed world decide to stop flying to help save the planet for their tourism sectors are usually based on tourists arriving by air on medium-haul and long-haul flights. We have totally failed to date to recognise this fact in the debates over sustainable tourism and as a result little thought has been given to how these places can be helped through the transition period while they find a new economic direction. This could mean us rather oddly having to compensate those destinations that we do not visit!

Maybe this is not too far fetched as the richer countries have in recent years grudgingly seemed to accept the need for them to provide financial assistance for poorer countries to help them combat climate change which will benefit everyone on the planet ultimately. While it is not the same thing as compensating destinations for their losses if tourists stop visiting it reflects a recognition that such assistance from richer nations may be needed to achieve something which is ultimately will be good for the whole planet.

I hope that while it is negative and undoubtedly depressing the preceding lengthy list of issues above justifies my contention that to date sustainable tourism has been a failure in practice.

That is not to say that some progress has not been made but the problems we have been aware of for decades are still there while new ones are emerging on a regular basis.

**Covid – a missed opportunity**

In the early days of Covid pandemic many hoped that the global pandemic would lead to a rethink of tourism and where it was heading that would create a desire to make it sustainable and responsible in the context of the climate emergency.
However, that view appears to have been naïve and seems to have been superceded by the idea that we have to get back to ‘normal’ in other words get things back to how they were pre-Covid. This is driven, perhaps understandably, by the economic problems caused around the world by the pandemic and made worse by the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on energy and food costs.

The problem with that desire to return to the ‘good old days’ before Covid is that pre-Covid tourism was not sustainable and was heading in the wrong direction.

So, there is still a need for tourism to develop in a new direction that aims to make it more sustainable while recognising its importance to national economies and destination communities.

**Progress has been made but too slowly**

Nevertheless, in the interests of fairness and balance it is important to acknowledge that some progress has been made on making tourism more sustainable or should that be responsible, over the past twenty years or so. There are numerous examples of good practice around the world in destinations and amongst tourism businesses. And, as the embryonic ‘flight shaming’ movement shows a few consumers are beginning to recognise that the carbon footprint of air travel currently is not compatible with the idea of sustainable tourism. Furthermore, some previously ignored tourism related issues have started to attract the attention they deserve such as animal welfare and human trafficking. This is all positive news which is to be welcomed.

Unfortunately, though, the reality is that things are not changing anything like quickly enough. We are generally moving in the right direction at the pace of a stroll in the park after a heavy lunch while climate change and the other crises we face are overtaking us at the speed of an Olympic sprinter who will soon disappear out of sight over the horizon. Unfortunately, as far as sustainability and tourism are concerned it looks at the moment as if this version of the story of the Tortoise and the Hare will not have a happy ending!

**The reasons why sustainable tourism has failed**

So why then has the concept sustainable tourism been such a failure? Why after years of policies, strategies, conferences, and research, is tourism continuing to contribute significantly to climate change and having such profound and widespread negative social, economic, and environmental impacts across the planet?

**Over-reliance on the United Nations and national governments**

Perhaps a major reason for the failure of sustainable tourism to date, as I alluded to above, has been the reliance on achieving it through the actions of supra governmental organisations such as the United Nations and national governments. The idea was that they would make sustainable tourism a reality through their policies and the use of the instruments at their disposal including regulation and taxation. Because there was a lot of talk about sustainable tourism by such bodies it was assumed that the political will was there to do what was necessary. This has simply not been the case which should probably
not surprise us because achieving more sustainable tourism would require radical and unpopular changes in tourist behaviour and as tourists are also voters, politicians do not like to upset them. This issue has probably been made worse in recent years with the election of populist politicians in many countries who are obsessed with economic growth at almost any cost it seems.

Rather than encouraging consumers and industry to embrace sustainable tourism this top-down approach has made many tourists believe that governments are dealing with this matter and so they do not have to take any action themselves to make their own behaviour of tourists more responsible.

Alternatively, the involvement of governments and supra-governmental bodies acting at a macro level makes many tourists feel that they cannot make a difference through their actions as an individual. Unfortunately, not enough has been done to turn the seventeen grandiose and rather platitudinous Sustainable Development Goals into concrete actions at the level of communities and individuals.

Meanwhile the lack of regulation, verifiable accreditation schemes and specific taxes designed to help make tourism more sustainable from governments has created an environment in which much of the tourism industry has in effect been able to ignore, or simply pay lip service, to the idea of sustainable tourism, without fear of any penalty or sanction.

The failure to recognise that sustainable tourism is a political issue

As mentioned earlier, a second fundamental obstacle to sustainable tourism making progress has been the fact that from the beginning sustainable tourism has been seen as a technocratic challenge rather than a political issue. Policy makers and academics have been more comfortable devising zoning policies or trying to measure carrying capacity rather than looking at the politics of sustainable tourism. Yet sustainable tourism is inherently political being concerned as it is with the distribution of resources in ways which will create winners and losers.

This unwillingness to engage with the political dimension of sustainable tourism may help explain the lack of progress in achieving one of its key pillars namely social equity. Equity or the lack of it lies at the heart of politics everywhere and the two things cannot be separated.

Recognising this would suggest that even the technocratic solutions and policies we seek to put in place need to be based on making things more equitable rather than increasing the disparities between rich and poor. Yet too often it seems that ordinary citizens are still left subsidising the vacations of affluent tourists through government investment in tourism infrastructure and mega events. Or, as we noted earlier, their rights are ignored when governments or developers want to use their land or the water on which they depend to help develop tourism in an area.

And this aversion to recognising that sustainable tourism is a political issue has also adversely affected what the industry has been doing in the name of sustainable tourism. That is why in most of the ‘corporate social responsibility policies’ of tour operators and
hotels the focus is on making donations to local charities or supporting wildlife conservation projects, which are not controversial rather than challenging governments over their failure to better regulate tourism or addressing the contentious issues of low pay, tipping, and discrimination in the hospitality industry which are seen as ‘too political’!

But even if we accept that sustainable tourism is at least in part a technocratic challenge then the simple fact is that our tourism management plans, and techniques have been grossly inadequate to date.

**Weaknesses in tourism management**

Tourism management continues to suffer from two major problems namely our inadequate understanding of the detailed impacts of tourism and the lack of tried and tested management techniques which are practical and cost-effective.

Despite decades of academic research and official reports we still do not really fully understand how tourism impacts different kinds of destinations and locations. There is not enough credible empirical research to allow us to identify in detail the challenges facing specific places and the strategies which are most likely to be effective. As a result, we are left with generic ideas that do not recognise that sustainable tourism policies will need to look different from one place to another, albeit subtly.

Furthermore, we lack the tools to effectively implement the concept of carrying capacity, for example, even if we were able to measure it in any meaningful way. And, of course in any event, there are several different types of carrying capacity such as physical, ecological, perceptual, social and community, so which one are we going to focus upon?

The issue of carrying capacity itself highlights the need for a change in the focus of academic research in tourism. We need to move away from purely theoretical research where the aim is to get work published in journals that few will read to applied research where knowledge is used to guide practical action to make tourism more sustainable. And given how urgent the situation is we need research which highlights and disseminates good practice in a timely manner and in accessible language designed to engage audiences rather than alienate them! Tourism academics need to have the self-confidence to believe that research can be both theoretically sound and rigorous as well as applied and with practical applications at the same time.

Furthermore, we have also concentrated on the impacts of tourism on the physical environment more than on the economic and social dimensions of sustainability. Yet it is surely inconceivable that tourism in an area could be seen as sustainable if its environment enjoyed full protection from tourism, but this was at the expense of the human rights of the local population, for example?

We have quite rightly placed great emphasis on tourism planning and on the involvement of host communities in the planning process. But our thinking has often failed to recognise that in many parts of the world land-use planning, backed by legislation, is rudimentary and poorly resourced, lacking enough skilled and experienced practitioners to make it effective.
Sadly, this is particularly the case in those poorer tourist destinations that often suffer the most from the worst effects of tourism.

Meanwhile, the voice of the tourism industry in many destinations is a loud one and is often the one listened to most by public sector decision-makers. By comparison the voice of local people in the planning process is often very quiet or they may even have no voice whatsoever.

Alternatively, in some so-called developed countries we see that ‘public participation’ in the planning process can reinforce the influence of the affluent and well-educated members of the community. This is often at the expense of those less well-off members of the community, who have not had the opportunity to have a good education, and who lack the time to participate in consultation exercises because it takes them all their time to keep a roof over their heads and put food on the table at home.

And, of course, there continues to be the problem of corruption with its corrosive impact on the functioning of tourism planning systems. The payment of bribes to an official or politician in a decision-making position is clearly corruption but if that decision-maker were to hide their financial interest in a project which they then approve or cause to be approved that would also be seen as corruption by most people.

However, good decision-making by governments can also be ‘corrupted’ and undermined in more subtle ways which while not necessarily illegal may be morally indefensible. This might be a hotelier saying they will close a hotel making many local people redundant if their plan to add more rooms or chop down lots of trees to build an extension is not approved. Or it might be an airline that says that it will no longer fly to a destination unless they receive a ‘subsidy’ or other financial support from a national government or local authority.

Yet even without corruption the challenge of making tourism more sustainable undoubtedly a daunting one, not least because of the range of issues we face in relation to the impacts of tourism around the world.

**The lack of holistic thinking**

We have too often failed to recognise that managing tourism requires a holistic approach based on systems thinking. Instead, we have tended to focus on one issue at a time, in isolation from others which are related. For example, we noted a little earlier the problem of just focusing on sustainability in terms of the environmental impacts of tourism rather than considering these also in relation to its social and economic impacts because they are all part of the same system.

The fact is that tourism is a complex system involving interdependent factors and the only way to manage it effectively is to take a holistic approach. Otherwise, there is always a risk that the ‘solution’ to one issue may just create a new problem elsewhere in the system. Our current level of knowledge and the tourism management techniques available to us to date are clearly inadequate for us to manage the complexities of the tourism system.
While climate change is undoubtedly the most urgent challenge facing the planet today, we cannot ignore a range of other issues where tourism specifically is having a negative impact on our world. These are numerous and diverse and some of them have already been mentioned earlier. They include the following:

- The consumption of water resources by tourists and the tourism industry given that much tourism takes place in locations where the climate means that droughts and water shortages are common. We have known for some time that water consumption by tourists even in arid regions was significantly higher per capita per day than that of local people and this consumption was unsustainable, particularly in poorer destination countries. (Page et al 2014). The excessive demands made on water resources by tourism also adversely affect the supply to other industries such as agriculture. One would imagine that the production of food is more important than the comfort and enjoyment of tourists but when it comes to water resources the opposite appears to normally be the case.

- The exploitation of wildlife, both at land and at sea, in the wild and in captivity which we discussed in some detail earlier

- The salaries paid to employees, labour rights and discrimination in the workplace which again was covered in a little more detail above.

- The link between travel and tourism, human trafficking and sexual exploitation including child sex tourism and forced prostitution, and the role of the hospitality industry, tour operators, and airlines in helping identify tourists travelling to exploit children for sexual gratification. The hotel, motel or resort may be where the sexual abuse takes places or can be the accommodation used by the perpetrator.

But an aspect of human trafficking that has attracted rather less attention to date has been the fact that some human trafficking involves the victims being put to work in hotels, restaurants, bars and casinos in a range of roles as part of the phenomenon which has been labelled ‘modern slavery’. These traffickers exploit labour shortages in the hospitality sector and that fact that some employers do not ask too many questions about potential employees or outsource services such as cleaning to external suppliers over which they have no control

- The relationship between tourism and the global refugee crisis. We have seen in Greece for example that a large-scale influx of refugees can change tourist perceptions of a destination and influence their decisions to visit or not. But at the same time in a number of countries governments have used hotels to accommodate refugees while their claims for asylum are processed which has brought extra income to the hoteliers.

- the phenomenon of ‘overtourism’ in different kinds of destinations, the feeling amongst local people that their community and their own everyday lives are being adversely affected by the sheer volume of tourism and by the type of tourism seen in the places in which they live.

- irresponsible volunteering which was highlighted earlier as an issue. The dramatic growth of ‘volunteer tourism’ has only really occurred in recent years and so it was something that
the early proponents of sustainable tourism either did not consider or saw as a positive development.

- the role of international travel in spreading disease which was laid bare by what happened with Covid. In Europe we saw a clear link between visits to Alpine ski resorts in March 2020 and the early spread of the disease in Europe. And in the early days of the pandemic cruise ship passengers who became returned home taking the virus back with them. Nor is this the first time that we have seen how international travel can spread disease. In 2003 when SARS was affecting Asia one or more passengers who travelled from Hong Kong to Toronto took the virus with them and it ended up killing forty-four people in the city before it was brought under control. In turn of course as we saw with Covid pandemics then decimate the tourism industry too. We therefore need to factor into our planning for sustainable and resilient tourism the risks posed by the transmission of diseases through international travel.

- The proportion of visitor spending in a destination that remains there for the benefit of the local community. It is well known that many destinations lose much of the potential economic benefits which tourism can bring them because of economic leakages. This is particularly true of destinations where the supply side is dominated by externally based organisations. Trying to ensure that tourist spending stays within the destination is difficult in an era of globalisation. Therefore, we need strategies that help locally businesses to compete with bigger external operators and encourage tourists to think about ‘buying local’ when they are choosing travel options, accommodation, entertainment, meals and drinks, excursions and activities, and souvenirs.

- Inclusivity in the tourism market and the fact that those with disabilities are still often unable to participate in a range of travel experiences because of a lack of suitable facilities. And, of course, lack of money means that many of the world’s citizens are unable to take one simple leisure trip a year while others are able to afford to fly across the world several times a year as well as taking short breaks nearer to home. Surely sustainable tourism needs to incorporate some concept of equity? Given the finite capacity of the world to accommodate tourism does this mean we should perhaps be rationing leisure travel in some way?

Tourism cannot be made more sustainable unless all of these issues and more are tackled simultaneously in a holistic way and yet some of them are still receiving much less attention than they merit as well as being handled in isolated silos rather than as part of an integrated and comprehensive approach to tourism management.

**Industry responses to sustainable tourism – from hope to despair**

To their credit some tourism businesses have engaged with sustainability issues in tourism and the author noted that in the 1990’s the tourism industry which seemed to be embracing sustainable tourism in a way that gave us hope that sustainable tourism was an attainable goal. However, today, with a few honourable exceptions, much of that hope has vanished for a number of reasons.
The simple fact is that many of the tourism businesses that were pioneers in sustainable tourism back in the 1990’s and 2000’s and invested heavily in making their operations more responsible have discovered that it brought them little financial reward in the short term because they have been undercut in the market by less scrupulous operators. The lack of industry-wide government regulation of tourism has created a market that is like a playing field which is far from level where the least responsible operators can gain an advantage over those endeavouring to be more responsible. This can surely not be right if we are committed to making tourism more sustainable. Even some tourism businesses themselves are now calling for further regulation of the industry, not least to protect them from what they see as unfair competition.

At the same time, many tourism enterprises seem to have seen sustainable tourism simply as a marketing led corporate social responsibility opportunity, focusing on media friendly activities around wildlife and supporting local charities in destinations rather than tackling the impacts of their own businesses on destinations and their contribution to climate change. This can sometimes be the result of a lack of understanding of tourism impacts or ignorance of good practice but the author fears that more often it is a conscious and even cynical attempt to simply gain a competitive advantage in the tourism market. Examples of so-called ‘greenwashing’ are still all too common across tourism and hospitality worldwide, unfettered by any regulation relating to the claims which are made by businesses about their contribution to sustainability.

Furthermore, a number of destinations and operators enthusiastically jumped onto the ‘ecotourism’ bandwagon suggesting that ecotourism and sustainable tourism were the same thing. Too often the word has been used to help sell holidays and attract tourists to destinations with little or no evidence that so-called ‘ecotourism experiences’ were any more sustainable than mainstream mass tourism. All the label ‘ecotourism’ did was attract more people to visit places that were remote and had ecosystems that were fragile and vulnerable. And it turns out that the footsteps of those who see themselves as ‘ecotourists’ are no lighter than those of anyone else!

Wheeler noted in 1993 when talking of the so-called ‘ecotourism market’, that ‘by combining the myth of the return to a ‘golden age of travel’ with that of images of a ‘return to nature’, the ‘thinking’ tourist is, willingly, seduced into believing that they/we are in fact sophisticated eco-sensitive travellers. The corollary of this cosy conspiracy is that tourism products deemed acceptable to this market have come to be regarded (wrongly) as being synonymous with sustainability. The process becomes one of smug satisfaction, of justifying growth and of expansion and spread of tourism. (Wheeler 1993) Written three decades ago this remains an all too true critique of much of what is marketed as ‘ecotourism’ even today.

The tourism industry is complex and is made up of a myriad of individual businesses, from multi-national corporations to one person enterprises. Their attitudes towards, and policies on, sustainable tourism are often based on the opinions and beliefs of key individuals whether they be Chief Executives of major corporations or the owner of a micro-enterprise.
It is not surprising, therefore, to find that tourism businesses respond in very different ways to the idea of sustainable tourism, based on whether they see it as a threat or an opportunity or something that is not a priority for them.

Indeed, the author has previously identified no fewer than nine different ways in which tourism businesses respond to challenges such as sustainability. These include problem denial, responsibility denial, tokenism, public relations response, legal compliance, cost reduction actions, single issue proactive action, holistic proactive action, and ideological conversion and corporate culture transformation. (Swarbrooke 2020). Of these nine types only two were seen to be proactive action based on a holistic approach which represents the most effective way of making tourism more sustainable and tackling climate change. And the author could not think of more than a tiny number of actual examples of either of them at the time of writing in 2020, just before the Covid pandemic struck the world.

Very few operators argue that climate change is not a serious tourism-related problem, but many seek to shift responsibility to other sectors like energy companies or other actors such as governments and local authorities. Some simply comply with any laws that may exist but go no further even if relevant laws are non-existent or wholly inadequate. Sometimes businesses will focus on a single issue, particularly one that has the potential to reduce their costs such as energy reduction measures or can improve their public image such as wildlife conservation. And some make tokenistic gestures such as planting a tree for each guest at a hotel or making charitable donations; both are worthy but make no significant contribution to sustainable tourism.

In general, it seems fair to say that for most tourism organisations their responses to sustainable tourism have been reactive rather than proactive and narrowly focused rather than holistic.

One interesting approach taken by a number of airlines has been the use of carbon offsetting to make consumers feel less guilty about flying. However, while offsetting is perhaps better than doing nothing it is not a solution to the problem of tourism’s contribution to climate change and it also shifts responsibility from the airline to the traveller. easyJet was an honourable exception to this approach when in 2019 it announced that it would be offsetting the trips of its passengers at its own expense. However, probably due to the financial impact of Covid and the rise in energy costs it was forced to announce that from 2023 the scheme would become an optional extra, paid for by passengers rather than the airline. In other words, changes in the business environment have made this airline feel it has to abandon an initiative which involved an airline being prepared to pay for its impacts rather than expecting its customers to do it for them. In reality perhaps both the airline and its passengers should share the cost?

Notwithstanding this easyJet initiative, in 2021 Horner and Swarbrooke argued that the tourism industry had generally ceased to show any real leadership on sustainable tourism in recent years. (Horner and Swarbrooke 2021)
This was in stark contrast to the situation in the 1990’s and the noughties when it was the industry rather than consumer pressure or government action that was driving what little change we saw.

**Loss of confidence within the tourism industry**

However, even before the Covid pandemic it felt like even the most enlightened companies in the tourism sector were losing confidence in their own future and in sustainable tourism too. The authors Horner and Swarbrooke writing in 2021 suggested this was probably due to four main factors namely:

- The fact that tourism businesses, particularly the larger ones, are losing their ability to influence tourist behaviour due to the rise of social media and consumer generated content and the subsequent switch in power from industry to consumers

- The changing focus in the sustainable tourism debate from maximising the benefits of the tourism for the host community and encouraging more responsible tourist behaviour to the climate crisis and tourism’s part in it has made the industry nervous. The contribution of tourism to climate change was shown to be significant and was something that could not be reduced quickly except by a reduction in the number of people travelling and that obviously was a threat to every business in the tourism sector.

- Many companies that were early adopters of sustainable tourism have seen little financial benefit from taking the initiative and have seen little real increase in consumer interest in taking more sustainable holidays, particularly if it means higher prices

- Those companies who have tried to ‘do the right thing’ and make their products more sustainable have been dismayed to find that the widespread practice of ‘greenwashing’ in tourism has made consumers sceptical about the idea of sustainable tourism (Horner and Swarbrooke 2021)

To this list should probably be added the turbulence and level of uncertainty in the business environment of the tourism sector which has reached unprecedented levels in the last few years. This has been caused by a wide range of diverse factors including the Covid pandemic, the increase in extreme weather events and natural disasters in tourist destinations, technological developments, political instability in a number of countries, rising energy costs, the effects of the refugee crisis and the war in Ukraine to name but a few.

The pandemic undoubtedly shook the confidence of the whole tourism industry firstly through its financial impact as business dried up and companies struggled to survive or ceased trading. And then as the world began to emerge from Covid the new challenge became one of finding enough staff to deliver services to tourists, most notably at airports and in the hospitality sector.

This general undermining of confidence within the industry has been a major obstacle to making tourism more sustainable in recent years and it is currently being dramatically exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic and the current cost of living crisis around the
world. Companies are feeling the need to ‘return to the basics’ of competitive pricing and simple offers for those desperate to take a vacation despite the cost-of-living crisis being experienced in most countries. In such a climate it is all too easy for sustainable tourism to seem like a luxury that struggling tourism businesses simply cannot afford.

Perhaps there was something of a ‘double whammy’ in relation to confidence and the tourism industry as in addition to a crisis of self-confidence in the industry the pandemic also affected consumer confidence in the tourism industry. This was due to the poor way in which many companies deal with cancellations and refunds and the apparently ineffective way in which cruise lines tackled Covid in the early days of the pandemic.

All of these issues help explain why the tourism industry as a whole has become less actively engaged in sustainable tourism as it was a decade or so ago.

**Tourist destinations – the mismatch of words and deeds**

Let us now shift our attention from the commercial sector of tourism to the area where the public sector is supposed to take the lead, namely destination management.

Many individual destinations have talked about sustainable tourism, but in truth few have made much progress as they often lack the power and resources to make a real difference. The reality is that the international tourism market is largely controlled by corporations which are beyond the influence of destination governments.

At the same time the ability of destinations to influence the behaviour of their visitors seems to be limited and in any event they may not wish to be seen trying to put any restrictions on their visitors in case that puts them off visiting the destination. The fear, perhaps unconscious, of losing tourists to competitor destinations may help explain the apparent lack of action on sustainable tourism by most destinations. This may be understandable to some extent particularly when one considers how many destinations rely heavily on direct spending by tourists and tax revenue from the tourism sector.

This may also help explain why the idea of a tourist tax has been fiercely resisted in many destinations although it seems a fair way of trying to fund at least some of the tourism infrastructure of a destination and pay for works that may be needed to tackle problems caused by the impacts of tourism.

The Balearic Islands in Spain tried to introduce a tourist tax in 2002 but had to withdraw it in 2003 in the face of industry opposition and a 25% reduction in visitors from the important German market. In the same year Gambia proposed to introduce a tax on all tourists but that too was abandoned in the face of opposition from the tourism industry.

Nevertheless, before Covid we saw a number of destinations introducing tourist taxes or planning too, partly due to the widespread publicity given to the ‘overtourism’ movement.

On the other hand, tourist taxes have been around for decades in some European countries. One such country is France where the rates for the ‘taxe de sejour’ are set by individual local authorities so that the amount tourists pay varies from one municipality to another.
Tourist taxes is a ‘catch all’ term which covers several types of taxes which are levied on travellers and often a tourist will pay more than one of them during a visit to a destination.

Firstly, there are the explicit tourist taxes which are often collected by accommodation operators on behalf of governments. These are not at all common outside Europe but are now seen today in countries such as New Zealand and Japan. The tax may be in the form of a single fixed payment fee, or it may vary depending on the duration of stay of a tourist.

Secondly, we have airport departure taxes which are much more common. These may be levied on international flights and/or domestic flights and often affect tourists and nationals of the country concerned. This is usually a fixed amount per passenger. Some countries now also impose ‘security’ taxes on airline passengers.

Thirdly, there are the lodging taxes which one finds in the USA which are a tax on those using accommodation, whether foreign tourists or nationals.

Fourthly, in a few countries there are taxes that are labelled in a way that indicates they are designed to address some of the impacts of tourism particularly those affecting the destination environment. In 2022 Mexico introduced an Environmental Sanitation Tax in some resorts to support government investment in ‘environmental infrastructure, sustainability, and safety’.

Fifthly, are the visa fees levied by many countries on foreign travellers which can also be seen as a form of tourist tax.

One reason why the tourism industry often opposes tourist taxes, of course, is that governments usually place the burden on them to collect the tax which can be a major challenge for a small business.

Another cause of concern with tourist taxes is the lack of transparency in many places about how the tax generated is spent. Is it used to pay for tourism services and infrastructure or environmental projects or does it just go into government coffers to be used for other purposes? The spending of tourist tax revenues is hardly ever transparent, so the suspicion remains that for some governments at least this is just another way of raising money to use for whatever purpose they choose. There needs to be more accountability from governments in how this revenue is spent.

And, of course, there is always a fear within the tourism industry that a tourist tax may dissuade visitors from visiting a destination with a tourist tax when competitor destinations do not have a tourist tax and may be less expensive to visit as a result.

Tourist taxes collected by accommodation operators can also cause complaints from these businesses who complain that those offering accommodation in the ‘hidden’ or ‘grey’ or ‘underground’ economy do not charge these taxes which gives them a price advantage in the market.

Interestingly, a tourist tax was reintroduced in the Balearic Islands 2016 under the label of a ‘sustainable tourism tax’ and in 2022 this tax varied between different types of
accommodation ranging from one Euro per person per night to four with cruise passengers paying two. Sensibly, perhaps, the rate of tax payable is much lower in the off-peak season.

Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that to date tourist taxes of all the types mentioned above have generally not contributed significantly to making tourism more sustainable. At best they have helped contribute towards the cost of providing the infrastructure used by tourism. But they are not generally used in a subtly nuanced way to influence tourist behaviour such as discouraging air travel or car use or penalising short stays and encouraging longer stays. Nor do they reward those who spend money with locally owned enterprises rather than with externally based or foreign corporations.

Indeed, most of the taxes levied on travellers appear to be just a rather cynical way in which destination governments can extract more money from visitors.

We therefore need to revisit the tourist tax idea perhaps in the context of the climate crisis and the well-established ideas of ‘fair trade’ for in many places the holidays of affluent tourists are still actually being subsidised from the tax revenues generated by local communities.

And the equally well-established concept of ‘the polluter pays’ also seems appropriate when the same local taxpayers often have to fund remedial work which is needed to deal with the negative impacts of tourism.

Tourist taxes could be simplified and used strategically and tactically to help make tourism more sustainable by encouraging tourists to:

- visit in the shoulder months or off-peak season rather than in the peak holiday season. This will help the cashflow of local businesses and mean more all-year-round rather than seasonal employment
- spend money with locally based businesses to maximise benefits for the local economy and reduce leakages in the local tourism economy
- visit less popular destinations where the revenue from tourism would be a valuable addition to a relatively disadvantaged local economy
- take longer stays in a destination to reduce the problems caused by intense short visits such as overcrowding at the most popular sites and alleviate pressure on tourism infrastructure
- arrive in a destination by train or bus rather than taking a flight when taking a short-haul trip to ensure that tourist visits have a smaller carbon footprint

Destinations could also perhaps introduce taxes on day visitors where such visits cause overcrowding in a place as a way of seeking to manage demand.

**Destination Management Organisations – it’s all about visitor numbers and spend**

Meanwhile, many local and national destination management organisations or DMO’s remain prisoners of the idea that the only way of measuring the success of tourism is
through visitor numbers and expenditure. This is ironic as many years of working in tourism research has shown the author that in many countries DMO’s do not have any way of collecting reliable and accurate data on either the volume of tourists visiting a destination or their spending.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic the focus appears to be, as we have noted earlier on returning tourism to pre-Covid levels despite the fact that there were already too many international flights being made and too much irresponsible tourism before the pandemic.

This crude focus on visitor numbers is utterly unhelpful for as we have seen with the ‘overtourism’ movement it is the number of tourists, as well as the types of tourism, which is a big part of the reason why tourism in many places is currently unsustainable.

At the same time, we have the obsession with publishing estimates, or should that be ‘guesstimates’, of total tourist spending which are generally as inaccurate as they are meaningless. This is more often, it appears, about politicians and DMO’s seeking to demonstrate what a good job they are doing.

Instead, we need to focus on the value instead of the volume of tourism in a destination, using qualitative as well as quantitative information. This means looking at the overall holistic contribution which tourism makes to the destination makes not just how much visitors spend. This is not just about economic metrics it also includes how tourism is contributing to social development and community resilience as well as how it is helping conserve or harming the destination environment. In terms of the economic impact of tourist, though, it means identifying the costs of meeting the demands of tourism set against the revenue from it. And it involves measuring leakages from the local economy as well as the ‘opportunity costs’ of tourism, in other words, what other opportunities might be lost if a destination focuses on investing in, and relying heavily upon, tourism.

This approach also means concentrating on minimising the negative impacts of tourism and maximising its benefits for all citizens not simply those with tourism-related businesses. Tourism, to be truly sustainable, surely needs to help reduce not increase the disparities between rich and poor. Moreover, tourism also should be seen to be reinforcing the resilience of communities in the face of climate change rather than undermining their ability to cope with its effects in future.

In recent years it has been fashionable in destinations to talk about needing more ‘quality tourism’. To date this has simply meant seeking to focus on attracting high-spending tourists to a destination. This is not compatible with sustainability for it fails the equity test that should be explicit in sustainable tourism in four main ways.

Firstly, it creates a two-class idea of tourism and discriminates against those who are not wealthy. Secondly, tourism is a mass market in which most tourists are not rich, and we can only achieve more sustainable tourism by managing demand by all tourists not just the most affluent. Thirdly, it does not guarantee that the spending of these ‘quality’ tourists will benefit everyone in the community, or even the majority of local residents. Finally, high
spending tourists are often also high-cost tourists who demand expensive infrastructure and services, some of which may be subsidised by local taxpayers.

If it is to be helpful, therefore, we need to re-set the meaning of the term ‘quality tourism’ so that it is based on the behaviour of tourists and the decisions they make not on their spending power. This means being respectful towards local people, buying products and services that most benefit the local economy, seeking to use more sustainable forms of transport, and being sensitive to local issues such as water resources, for example.

**Trying to build better tourism for tomorrow with yesterday’s economic models**

In order to make tourism more sustainable we also have to develop new metrics for evaluating tourism and we need to be willing to embrace alternative economic models such as ‘Doughnut Economics’. This idea developed in 2017 by Kate Raworth takes a much broader and holistic sustainability related view of economics than the traditional economic theories that have dominated for so long despite looking increasingly obsolete in the times in which we are living (Raworth 2017). Free market capitalism seems totally incompatible with sustainable development while ‘trickle down economics’ has been shown to be too slow and too inequitable to contribute effectively to sustainability and tackling climate change.

Doughnut Economics is already being experimented with in a number of destinations and some researchers are already looking at what a ‘doughnut destination’ might look like in the future. (Hartman and Heslinga 2022)

Sadly, for the time being though we are failing to make tourism more sustainable because we are trying to make it work in the context of economic models and theories which are simply no longer ‘fit for purpose’. Some of these models and theories date back to a time of empires, slavery, and sailing ships when very few people had a vote or a say in how their country was run. They are based on the idea of continuous growth, private profit, and ruthless exploitation of resources. How can they possibly be appropriate to a world threatened by climate change which has largely been caused by largely unfettered capitalism, the theory which still underpins much of our economic policy despite it being some two hundred years old at least?

It is now time to move on from looking at economic models to consider those who are the reason why tourism exists, the tourists themselves.

**Why have so few tourists have engaged with sustainable tourism?**

Of course, tourism is ultimately about tourists and what they do and how they behave largely determines whether or not tourism can be made more sustainable. Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved without the active cooperation of most or all tourists not just a few.

Therefore, it is sad to have to acknowledge that by and large tourists themselves have not generally engaged with sustainable tourism perhaps because they feel they cannot make a difference as individuals.
It may also reflect the fact that some sustainable tourism literature seems to portray tourists in ways which are derogatory or prejudiced which is hardly likely to encourage tourists to embrace sustainable tourism.

Many destinations and businesses do not even mention climate change and the negative impacts of tourism to potential customers at all for fear it may dissuade them from travelling to particular destinations. Therefore, if sometimes tourists claim they did not act in a more responsible way because they were unaware of a particular issue in a specific destination they may have a valid point.

Unfortunately, there has been, over the years, too much arrogant and patronising talk about ‘educating tourists’ as if those in power knew all the answers and just needed to teach tourists the right way to behave. Much of this talk comes from those within the political, economic, and social ‘elites’ in the countries concerned which is ironic given that it is people from these elites who tend to fly most so that their contribution to climate change is significantly greater than that of those that they seek to ‘educate’.

Rather than telling tourists what not to do we should be aiming to work with tourists and encouraging them to adopt more responsible behaviours. Tourists will respond better if we explain why they should behave in a certain way, and it will work better if we can make them feel good about ‘doing the right thing’. And we will be more effective if we recognise that most of us are also tourists at some time. Tourists are not another species, they are us. And, of course, most of the time even those who do take vacations are not tourists either, they are members of local communities living their everyday lives.

The author believes that if we are to actively engage tourists in sustainable tourism we first need to stop making value judgements about certain types of tourism, tourist behaviours and tourists which are based purely on prejudice rather than hard evidence.

Unfortunately, from the early days of the existence of the concept of sustainable tourism many types of tourism were viewed as ‘good’ and others ‘bad’ based on subjective opinions and the preferences of the person making these judgements rather than any research data. According to this conventional wisdom which went largely unchallenged independent travel was better than package holidays, small-scale tourism was better than so-called mass market tourism, nature watching and activity- based holidays were better than lying by a hotel pool for one or two weeks and so on. As such Belize was cited as an example of sustainable tourism while mass market resorts such as Benidorm were considered to be the antithesis of the idea of sustainable tourism.

Yet in reality things are more complex than that. Belize requires a medium to long-haul flight by almost of its visitors which means that each of them has a relatively large carbon footprint. In terms of social equity, the cost of holidays to Belize is beyond the means of most people in the world. And as a destination based on nature and its environment it is now having to deal with the consequences of its success which is leading to growing pressure on its nature and its environment, both of which are fragile. Benidorm, on the other hand, has been developed for tourism specifically and no longer promotes itself as a fishing village as it was originally decades ago. It is well managed and provides enjoyable
inexpensive holidays for those who cannot afford more expensive and exclusive destinations. By concentrating visitors in a single self-contained tourist enclave it makes it possible to manage tourism so that it does not adversely affect other more environmentally or socially vulnerable areas with its impacts.

Whether one destination is more sustainable or responsible than another is not a matter of whether the type of holiday it offers is to our taste or not, it is about an objective evaluation of the impacts of tourism based on evidence and effective management of them.

We need to recognise that the only way in which tourism can be made more sustainable is if every type of tourism is made as made as responsible as possible which means engaging every tourist regardless of their vacation preferences. And given that by its very definition mass market tourism involves far more people than niche market tourism it should be obvious that making it more sustainable has to be a priority surely?

Perhaps, we also need to recognise that when we travel we are all tourists regardless of what type of vacation we take and where we go. Once and for all we need to end the meaningless snobbery which makes us see some people - usually other people we do not know- as tourists - and others - usually ourselves - as travellers – based on the type of holiday taken and the destination visited. Whatever type of trip we take we need to recognise that as tourists we are all responsible for the impacts of what we do when we travel for leisure or business.

The author believes that we also need to recognise that tourists, like citizens, should have rights as well as responsibilities including:

- the right not to be exploited and over-charged because they are tourists and/or foreigners
- the right not to have their health and safety put at risk by irresponsible behaviour by hoteliers, activity organisers, and transport operators
- the right not to be discriminated against based on their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, or disabilities
- the right to be treated with respect
- the right not to be seen as legitimate targets by terrorist groups

Of course, the latter three rights are also equally relevant to members of the local community in destinations.

The lack of globally recognised independently verified standards for tourism

A major barrier for those tourists who do want to make responsible purchasing decisions in tourism is the continued lack of globally accepted and independently verified sustainable tourism ‘standards’ to help guide them. That is the situation despite literally hundreds of government and EU funded projects and industry schemes developed in particular locations and sectors around the world.
However, at the same time there is no shortage of examples of ‘greenwashing’ and sustainable tourism accreditation schemes for which claims are made without credible independent verification. These only serve to undermine consumer confidence in the idea of sustainable tourism.

And while ISO 14001 potentially covers some of the environmental impacts of tourism we do not have an ISO which covers the complex topic of sustainable tourism as a whole nor does it look likely that such an ISO will be developed in the foreseeable future.

All of this leaves tourists at best confused and at worst sceptical about sustainable tourism as a whole. This makes it all too easy for them to just ignore the negative impacts of tourism or tell themselves there is nothing that they can do to help make things better.

There is also, worryingly, clear evidence that many tourists are being led to believe by some travel media that in some parts of the world some tourism destinations have already gone past the point of no return due to climate change so that they should ‘see it while you can’. And this is not really new for nearly ten years ago the influential travel guide brand Rough Guides published a list of what they called ‘20 places to visit before they disappear’. They included the rainforests of Brazil and Madagascar, Venice, the Maldives, the site of the original Olympics in Greece, the glaciers on Mount Kilimanjaro, the ice fields of Patagonia, the Great Barrier Reef, the Dead Sea, and the vineyards of Bordeaux! (https://www.roughguides.com 2014) This rather defeatist attitude from a respected member of the travel media is bound to sap confidence in the idea that tourism can become sustainable.

The failure to engage the luxury market in sustainable tourism

There is one segment of the tourism market that needs to be specifically mentioned because it represents a particular challenge to achieving more sustainable tourism and that is the luxury market. In 2018 the author wrote that ‘tourism can only become more sustainable if the luxury market and those who supply it become more responsible. (Swarbrooke 2018) Yet, traditionally, there has been a view that luxury sector customers will not be interested in, or amenable to, the idea of sustainable tourism as it will require them to sacrifice their desires for the common good.

To consider this issue further we probably need to recognise that the luxury market is, in crude terms, probably made up of at least two different and distinct segments, namely:

- the rich who travel more frequently and consume more tourism services per capita than those with lower incomes. For them luxury is a way of life, and most of them will expect to enjoy the same standard of living on vacation as they do in their everyday lives. These two facts mean that almost inevitably that their carbon footprint as travellers is likely to be significantly bigger than that of most other tourists

- those who are not rich but who to aspire to live a luxury lifestyle. For these people their vacations are an opportunity to indulge in types of travel experience that they perceive to be luxurious, to live at a level that they cannot afford to live at in their everyday lives. This group is almost certainly larger than the first segment and seems to be growing. It almost
certainly accounts for much of the growth in the cruise market that we have seen over the
past two decades or so

To attract and satisfy both of these luxury market segments the tourism industry offers
them carefree travel, pampering, and ostentatious consumption based apparently on the
idea that ‘the customer is always right’. This view of holidays is not really compatible with
the idea of sustainable tourism in which tourists should focus on behaving responsibly even
if this means denying themselves experiences they would otherwise enjoy. And it is totally
at odds with what the industry and destinations are selling vacations to these economically
important segments. ‘It has often seemed as if luxury consumers were being encouraged (by
the tourism industry and destinations) to believe that they had no responsibility for anything
apart from their own hedonistic enjoyment’. (Swarbrooke 2018) A good example idea of this
are the brochures of cruise lines in which the cruise ship is an oasis of carefree indulgence,
responsibility-free vacationing, where no one has to worry about the impact of their
behaviour on the planet.

We will now move away from looking at the consumer and instead focus on the
communities in the destinations they visit. But before we focus just on the communities the
author would like to just say a few words specifically about the relationship between
tourists and local communities, between the guests and the hosts.

The relationship between hosts and guests

Since the early days of modern tourism there has first a belief and then a rather forlorn
hope that travel would lead to a better understanding and awareness between the people
of different nationalities and cultures. This may have been naïve in some ways, but it feels
as if this is something that should have been fully embraced and indeed prioritised as an
ambition by the sustainable tourism movement.

Yet, sadly, this hope for what tourism could achieve has not been realised not least because
poverty in so many parts of the world has meant that tourism never became a two-way flow
really. The affluent visited poor countries but the residents of those countries have
generally been unable to travel to the home countries of the tourists. And when they have
tried to visit them as economic migrants they have rarely been welcomed. If we believe
that travel is a human right then perhaps we should be looking to equalise the opportunities
for travel between those from richer and poorer countries?

In relation to the idea that tourism can build bridges between cultures perhaps two of the
most depressing developments in tourism in recent years have been the growing popularity
of cruising and all-inclusive resorts. It is possible to see why both have become popular, but
the simple fact is that both forms of tourism isolate tourists from the places they visit and
particularly from contact with the host communities except for those local residents paid to
serve drinks or meals to the tourists or provide entertainment or massages for them. This
feels like a retrograde step on the journey towards more sustainable tourism.

Let us now focus on where local communities fit into the story of sustainable tourism to
date.
Underestimating the complexity of the idea of ‘the local community’

The author believes that the rather simplistic ideas about the concept of the local community and especially the idea of what is termed the host community which have underpinned sustainable tourism thinking for so long may have been an obstacle to making progress.

The conventional wisdom in sustainable tourism is that tourism should, in some way, be under the control of local communities and responsive to their needs and few might argue with that view. However, it sadly looks naïve in today’s world where many local communities have little power over their lives in the face of globalisation and totalitarian governments. Again, this shows that sustainable tourism is intrinsically a political issue as it is about who has power and who does not.

Furthermore, communities rarely speak with a single voice and nor does everyone in most communities have an equal voice. Indeed, some seem to have no voice at all. Therefore, formal community participation exercises in tourism planning in destinations may simply strengthen the influence of affluent well educated at the expense of those who are less well educated and financially disadvantaged. In so-called developing countries this may lead to rapid tourism development that may involve ‘land grabs’ where the rich and powerful take land and resources previously used by local residents. On the other hand, in affluent developed countries it is often the opposite situation with affluent and influential property owners resisting tourism development which might provide income and employment for the poorest in the local community.

It is also fair to say that tourism planners and academics have almost certainly taken too little account of how the concept of ‘community’ has changed dramatically in recent years. It is necessary to rethink our understanding of the term given:

● the widespread economic migration seen around the world and the flows of refugees that are now seen across the planet are introducing diversity into communities which were previously largely homogeneous. The idea of a community in these situations depends on whether these movements of people are temporary or permanent and the extent to which economic migrants and refugees are integrated into a local community

● the rapid increase in second home ownership in many countries which, has been stimulated by tourism, and brings people into the community of a destination for a few days, weeks, or months each year. How well or not these second homeowners integrate into the community and the level of their spending in the local area can have a major impact on the sustainability of the local tourism industry and the wider local community. To what extent should they be seen as members of the destination community that they inhabit for a period of time each year? The role of the owners of second homes in destination communities is particularly problematic in places where there is a housing shortage and a perception that second home buyers are inflating housing costs beyond the level at which they are affordable for local residents and those born in the destination
that in some destinations seasonal labour moves into a destination for a period of weeks or months where the local population is not large enough to provide sufficient labour or where the local workers are not perceived to have the skills and attributes for working in the tourism sector. These workers may come from very different cultures to that of the destination community and their presence is bound to have some effect on the culture of the destination over a period of time.

● the huge growth in social media which has created ‘virtual communities. For some people these communities are more real and important to them than any community in the place they physically live. They may ‘meet’ online regularly with someone who lives on the other side of the world but may never talk to the people who live in the apartment next door. These online communities, often based on mutual interests and shared attitudes, have also become incredibly influential in the purchase decisions made by tourists who trust the opinions of fellow tourists more than those of the mainstream tourism industry.

It is vital that tourism academics, planners and policymakers take account of these developments in the concept of ‘community’ as they represent either an opportunity or a threat in relation to making tourism more sustainable depending on how we respond to them.

However, the author believes it is also important to recognise that local communities are not always benevolent and can display attitudes to some visitors based on their nationality, ethnic origin or sexual orientation which are at odds with the principles of sustainable tourism.

We are still struggling to find the balance between tourists respecting the culture and beliefs of local communities and those communities respecting the human rights of tourists. By coincidence this is being written during the World Cup in Qatar amidst controversy over the attitude of the host country towards LGBTQIA+ visitors. Until we are able to resolve this fundamental issue sustainable tourism will probably remain an impossible dream.

If we are to make tourism more sustainable in the future we also have to become quicker at spotting trends in society and the economy and responding to them in a timely manner. Governments need to become quicker at anticipating how such trends will affect tourism and its impacts on local communities and plan accordingly.

Sadly, to date, sustainable tourism theory and policy development seems to have failed to keep pace with changes in tourism in recent years including the rise of Airbnb, for example. Not enough local authorities and governments have intervened to tackle the negative impact Airbnb has had on the housing situation in some communities. And it took protests by frustrated local residents to make the authorities in a number of European cities aware of the idea of ‘overtourism’, where in some destinations, locals feel tourism is having a detrimental impact on their everyday lives. Their local authorities should have identified and reacted to this this problem a long time before protests began.
The belief that new technologies will make tourism more sustainable

Moving on, something that is truly worrying in our response to the climate change crisis is the idea that it, like other challenges we face, will be solved by technological solutions so our lifestyles will not need to change. Despite the urgency of the situation governments and industry seem to believe that technological solutions can be implemented in time to avert disaster. While we are seeing encouraging technological developments, in aviation for example, we cannot rely on these to solve climate change for we need to be reducing our carbon footprint literally today if the planet is to avoid climate catastrophe.

We know that any technological innovation will take a number of years to be fully introduced, by which time the point of no return on climate change might well have been reached. And, of course, we know from past experience that technological innovations that solve one problem may create new unforeseen challenges of their own.

That is not to say that we should not continue to pursue technological advances that can help make tourism more sustainable, but we cannot rely on them to solve every issue relating to sustainability in tourism from the use of water resources to discrimination in the labour market, human trafficking to animal welfare.

Sustainable tourism needs to be seen in the context of sustainable development

Some of the criticisms of existing approaches to sustainable tourism which I have discussed above could equally be applied to sustainable development and the fight against climate change, in general. One of these is the reliance on medium and long-term goals without shorter term objectives as staging posts towards the achievement of the goals. It is difficult for people to engage with goals or targets that may be decades in the future. And too often the targets are set without an idea of what actions will be needed almost year by year if they are to be achieved and who will need to take these actions.

Furthermore, it is my belief that after years of being bombarded with the word sustainable/sustainability people are suffering from ‘sustainability fatigue’ which is stopping them engaging with the issues. Surrounded on all sides by government policy initiatives, pressure group protests, businesses using their alleged concern with environmental issues to help them sell their goods and services and frightening media stories it is perhaps not surprising that many people just want to bury their heads in the sand and ignore the ‘s’ word. Obviously this is a serious problem as we need to get everyone on board if we are to make development more sustainable and tackle climate change.

But my purpose here is to focus specifically on tourism rather than sustainable development in general in a belief that whoever reads this piece will be someone is likely to be someone with an interest in tourism who has the ability to make a difference to the future of tourism whether as a tourist, an entrepreneur, a public sector decision maker, a planner, a journalist, an educator, or a researcher.
The current political and economic climate and the future of sustainable tourism

Having looked at the failings of sustainable tourism to date it is time to look to the future and see how we can learn the lessons of the past, quickly, and implement radical change to make tourism more sustainable.

However, at the time of writing in late autumn 2022 the prospects for positive change in tourism do not look good, largely due to the economic and political environment. This suggests that making progress on sustainable tourism in the next year or two, at least, will be especially challenging to put it mildly.

The Covid pandemic has left governments with damaged economies and citizens with a burning desire to travel again following the restrictions they endured during the pandemic. Destinations and the tourism industry are desperate to see tourism grow again to at least pre-Covid levels when international travel was already at levels that were probably not sustainable even then.

At the same time the war in Ukraine which is still raging at the time of writing has helped cause an energy crisis, food supply problems, a rapid increase in the cost of living and high inflation across the world.

All of this has understandably taken the attention of governments, industry, and citizens away from issues such as climate change and sustainability more generally. The resulting global crisis has also diverted government policy and spending in many countries away from measures to fight climate change into inherently unsustainable sources of energy such as coal and oil as well as increasing spending on arms and defence rather than sustainable development. This underpinned the failure of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP 27, which was held in Egypt in November 2022 and was unable to make significant progress on measures to combat climate change.

As if this were not bad enough we have seen the election of populist politicians around the world whose focus is on rapid economic growth rather than sustainable development.

And, of course, at the same time climate change is making life increasing difficult for the tourism industry itself in many destinations. Popular vacation spots on just about every continent are facing more frequent and serious crises caused by hurricanes, floods, droughts, and wildfires which are at least partly caused by the consequences of climate change. All of these have a direct impact on the tourism sector, affecting demand and increasing costs for operators.

So, it is clear that this is a difficult time in our history in which to talk about efforts to make tourism more sustainable but we are running out of time so we cannot delay, we need to change our approach and try to move forward towards more sustainable tourism. In doing so we will also be making a contribution towards sustainable development in general.

There is, of course, no guarantee that tourism can be sustainable, so the idea of sustainable tourism may itself be an impossible dream. (Swarbrooke 1999)
However, if we are to stand any chance of making tourism more sustainable then it requires a radical change of approach.

**The need to switch from talking about sustainable tourism to responsible tourism**

We need to stop relying on a top-down approach based on action by governments and supra-governmental organisations such as the UN and the EU. Even if these bodies do start to take more effective action, which does not appear likely at the moment, it will almost certainly not happen before we reach a point where the crisis we face becomes irreversible.

Instead, we need a bottom-up approach based on every single person or organisation being encouraged to do what they can to make tourism more likely to be sustainable. This idea is the basis of the concept of ‘responsible tourism’, which has been championed by people such as Goodwin in his 2016 book, *Responsible Tourism: Using Tourism for Sustainable Development* (Goodwin 2016).

The responsible tourism movement, as we saw earlier, began really with the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in 2002 which was followed by the Kerala Declaration on Responsible Tourism in 2008. It has been championed by the Responsible Tourism Partnership and had a significant impact around the world through the annual ‘Responsible Tourism in Destinations’ conferences and the annual Responsible Tourism Awards which began back in 2004.

Responsible tourism is an idea based on a number of assumptions or beliefs namely:

- that making tourism more sustainable is a political issue in that it is about the distribution of resources and is a process that will create both winners and losers. Thus, it needs political action to achieve it which can be citizen activism as well as government funding, policies, and regulation. It needs a new type of inclusive politics based on the idea that everyone should have an equal voice. If democracy means anything then it must be that surely?

- that large-scale change can be achieved through the combined effect of a large number of relatively small-scale actions undertaken by lots of different individuals and organisations across the world

- that a bottom-up citizen led rather than a top-down approach based on governments and supra-governmental organisations is more likely to be successful in making tourism better

- that the idea of sustainable tourism cannot be seen in isolation from the issue of sustainable development as a whole. Neither is possible without the other

- that action and practice are more important than talk and theory for what is at stake is the future of life on our planet and change needs to be rapid before the problems we face become irreversible

- that tourism has to improve the lives of local people as well as simply providing enjoyable experiences for tourists
that each place is different and needs to find approaches to tourism management which work in their particular location rather than relying on standardised models which take no account of geographical differences

that examples of good practice in tourism management need to be disseminated as widely, quickly, and inexpensively as possible so that they may be adapted and replicated

But primarily, at its heart, responsible tourism is based on the idea that everyone has a role to play in making tourism more responsible. This includes tourists, social media influencers, tourism and hospitality entrepreneurs and their supply chains, politicians and public sector decision-makers, tourism planners, DMO’s, journalists and the media, pressure groups, and local communities.

Better tourism depends on all tourists being willing to make changes to their behaviour as consumers of tourism. This is most likely to happen by explaining why they need to change their behaviour and making them feel good about being more responsible by showing them that ‘doing the right thing’ makes them feel better and less guilty about any vacation they take. We all need to learn what works best by working together rather than elites talking patronisingly and arrogantly about the need to ‘educate tourists’

Responsible tourism is not about a conflict-based ‘them and us’ attitude to tourism with tourists and hosts on opposite sides. Instead, it recognises that we need to build a partnership between both groups based around their love for where they live or visit, and a consensus that tourist destinations are places where people live as well as visit. And it is clear that a place which is good to live in is probably also going to be somewhere that is good to visit, so locals and tourists have a shared interest in the quality of life in a place. This emphasises the fact that responsible tourism is based on the idea of mutually beneficial partnerships between governments and communities, tourism businesses and their customers, hosts and guests, social media influencers and tourists, DMO’s and tour operators and airlines, and so on.

Because we almost certainly have only a limited amount of time to make tourism more sustainable given the climate change crisis we face the focus of responsible tourism has to be on action not words. That is a lesson which we have learned from our experience of decades of debates about sustainable tourism.

The implementation of responsible tourism also requires the sharing of good practice around the world quickly and at low or no cost so that it can be replicated everywhere with modifications to meet different local conditions. We do not have time to keep ‘reinventing the wheel’ when we have already identified a number of approaches and techniques which are effective in making tourism more responsible and sustainable. Governments, the European Union, and the United Nations need to bear this in mind when designing funding programmes for tourism projects.

With the idea of disseminating good practice in mind the Responsible Tourism Partnership in 2021 launched its ‘Platform for Change’ which it described as a ‘solutions platform, accelerating change in travel and tourism’. (https://www.responsibletourismpartnership.org)
Why Sustainable Tourism Failed

2022) This open-source platform provides examples of proven solutions to the challenges caused by tourism around the world. These solutions, it claims, are presented on the platform in enough detail that they can be adapted and replicated in other locations and situations.

Responsible tourism does not see tourism as an island but rather recognises it is just one human activity and one economic sector amongst many on the planet. It is based on a holistic view of sustainability that encompasses all human activities and economic sectors as well as the natural world and the physical environment. It realises that sustainable tourism is not possible without broader sustainable development and vice-versa.

Sustainable tourism and responsible tourism are, however, different in one crucial respect. Sustainable tourism as it has been presented to date is an absolute, a destination that is either reached or not, where the only options are success or failure. Responsible tourism instead focuses on the journey rather than just the final destination not least because the destination itself is likely to change over time as the world evolves. Even if the idea of sustainable tourism turns out ultimately to be unattainable we can still harness the skills of everyone on the planet to make tourism better which will in turn benefit everyone on the planet. This approach based on incremental change and continuous action means that responsible tourism can lead to better tourism day by day and in doing so can contribute to more sustainable development and to tackling climate change.

Perhaps the other big difference between sustainable tourism and responsible tourism relates to how easy or difficult it is for each of these concepts to engage the earth’s population. For many people sustainable tourism is a rather abstract idea operating at the macro level far above their heads which is difficult to grasp and leaves most people with a feeling that they cannot make a difference. Responsible tourism, by contrast, is based on the idea that everyone can make a difference by taking responsibility for those things they are able to control or at least influence and doing what they can to move tourism in the right direction.

There is no guarantee that responsible tourism will succeed where sustainable tourism has failed but it is worth pursuing. It is a positive concept that fits well with the idea of inclusivity, the importance of which is now being increasingly recognised. Its approach based on incremental change seems more appropriate for a world experiencing rapid change than the more fixed concept of sustainable tourism with its idea of a single destination. And the development of social media has given us a tool to help us bring all the different actors together so they can work in unison to make tourism more responsible.

We also need to recognise the importance of the idea of building resilience into the tourism sector to help it be better prepared to handle whatever the future throws its way. This resilience is certainly relevant to the climate crisis and its impacts including extreme weather and ‘natural’ disasters. But it also relates to other types of crises that affect tourism from war and civil disorder to economic downturns, pandemics to political instability. In the future responsible tourism will also need to be resilient tourism.
It is true that the prospects for sustainable tourism do not look good. It has been a failure to date and the lessons from this failure are not being learned quickly enough. At the same time. Global sustainable development still seems a long way off and it looks as if we are currently losing the battle to tackle climate change. If we cannot successfully tackle climate change then sustainable tourism will become an irrelevance for the impacts of tourism will be the least of our worries!

However, we cannot just give up and just because sustainable tourism failed does not mean that we cannot make tourism better through our actions as individuals while also doing what we can to help tackle climate change. It has got to be worth a try!

Twenty years after the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism, on 6 November 2022, a new document, the 2022 Responsible Tourism Charter was signed on Magna Carta Island in the UK. ([https://www.responsibletourismpartnership.org](https://www.responsibletourismpartnership.org) 2022) This symbolic location is where the iconic Magna Carta was signed by King John in 1215, a document that set the country on the road to democracy.

The new Responsible Tourism Charter was signed by representatives of the tourism sector from a number of countries including Australia, Canada, Brazil, Gambia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Africa, and the UK. It is a living document and new signatures are being added to it all the time as people come on board with the initiative.

Hopefully, the signing of this charter will be a catalyst for change just as the original Magna Carta was eight centuries ago. However, this time that change cannot take centuries, it needs to start today!

**A final appeal**

And you as an individual can make as big a contribution to making tourism better as anyone else on the planet. All you have to do is take responsibility for your own behaviour and its impacts and try to influence others that can make a difference, from governments to the media, the tourism industry to your friends and neighbours. It is in your hands!
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