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# Sustainable tourism development: Towards resilience in tourism

Dr Joseph M. Cheer and Prof Alan A. Lew



This article is produced on behalf of the International Geographical Union (IGU) Commission on the Geography of Tourism and Leisure and Global Change.

## Abstract

In this paper, we offer a concise appraisal of the sustainable tourism discourse and pave the way for resilience thinking in tourism. The study of tourism is inherently multi-disciplinary, covering traditional disciplines such as geography (physical and human), economics, anthropology, politics, environmental science and a wider range of sub-disciplines including cultural studies, regional and international development, mobilities, hospitality management, community development and poverty alleviation, among others. The area known in academic circles as *Tourism Geography* is especially pertinent to the study of tourism given the focus on people and place, and time and space and the many variables that inhabit the so-called “tourism system”. For students of Geography at secondary school level, the study of tourism enables the integration of a wide range of geographical knowledge and concepts, and the various geographies encompassed in both human and physical geography. For many students, international exchanges and fieldtrips, as well as personal travel, allow the opportunity to practise Tourism Geography through real world experiences. Consequently, students will relate very closely to the study of tourism in Geography. Importantly, one of the key aims in examining tourism within the study of Geography is to develop critical perspectives that look beyond the superficial demonstration of tourism as embodied in luxury

hotels, airlines and tourist enclaves, and to more nuanced and sophisticated demonstrations of Geography at work through tourism.

## Introduction

In *The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton says, “If our lives are determined by a search for happiness, then perhaps few activities reveal as much about the dynamics of this quest – in all its ardour and paradoxes – than our travels”.<sup>1</sup> While de Botton refers to travel as a means of escape from the everyday and as a way to immerse in a culture and place other than one’s own, travel is by nature a consumptive practice, reliant on linking people, place and space, and enabling mobility through the development of infrastructure for travellers.

At the end of 2012, the number of travellers criss-crossing the globe exceeded one billion for the first time exemplifying this insatiable quest.<sup>2</sup> While much travel is

1 De Botton, A. (2003). *The Art of Travel*: Penguin UK.  
 2 UNWTO. (2016). *Global Report on the Transformative Power of Tourism: a paradigm shift towards a more responsible traveller*. Madrid: United Nations World Tourism Organisation.



Figure 1: Why tourism matters (Source: UNWTO, 2016)

driven out of the developed country nodes in Europe and North America, increasing numbers are emanating from countries in Asia, and especially China. Additionally, the extent of domestic travel in many countries is far more significant than foreign tourist visitation.

The growth of international travel has generated a commensurate interest in its potential to contribute to economic development, which is even more pronounced in less developed and peripheral locations where alternative livelihoods are limited. Accordingly, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) promotes tourism as a path to development, prosperity and well-being (figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Tourism is also touted as a potential vehicle for peace and greater understanding amongst peoples, as enabling poverty alleviation for marginal peoples, as a means of fostering gender empowerment, as a way to protection of fragile natural landscapes and as a tool to promote the practice and preservation of cultures.<sup>4</sup>

While the growth of global tourism is embraced in many quarters, it is also criticised for some of its less desirable outcomes, including high levels of carbon emissions through air, land and sea transportation, inappropriate tourism development in fragile cultural and environmental settings, the marginalisation of local peoples through exploitation and displacement, the crass commodification of cultural and heritage assets, the breaching of carrying capacities in natural settings and contributing to overcrowding and inflationary effects in urban settings. The dichotomy between tourism's potential benefits and the pitfalls of its unbridled expansion is an increasing concern for research and public policy. However, the assessment of tourism's merits will vary considerably from one place to the next, depending on context and circumstances.

Forecasts for international tourism show little letup, with the UNWTO estimating around 1.8 billion international travellers in 2030.<sup>5</sup> While this bodes especially well

3 <http://www2.unwto.org/en>

4 <http://www2.unwto.org/content/why-tourism>

5 <http://mkt.unwto.org/publication/unwto-tourism-highlights-2016-edition>

for destinations where tourism underpins economic development, on the flip side, this paves the way for increased pressure on ecosystems and communities upon which the travel experience is drawn from. This has shaped the sustainable tourism discourse with the emphasis on how tourism expansion can occur, while maintaining the integrity and security of people and place.

## Global tourism status quo – some key trends

The overriding trend in global tourism is its continued growth despite the intermittent occurrence of natural disasters, economic recessions, terrorism and political instabilities around the globe.<sup>6</sup> International tourist arrivals have continued on an upward and accelerating trend for the past several decades, with the only exceptions being the events of 9/11 in New York (in 2001) and the global economic recession of 2008–2010. According to the UNWTO “2016 was the seventh consecutive year of sustained growth following the 2009 global and economic and financial crisis” and more than “300 million more international tourists travelled the world in 2016 as compared to the pre-crisis record in 2008” (figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

The UNWTO also estimates that tourism accounts for 10 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), one in every 11 jobs, \$US1.5 trillion in export earnings, 7 per cent of the world's exports and 30 per cent of services exports.<sup>8</sup> (When tourists spend money in a country other than their own, it is considered “export earnings” by the receiving country.) By any measure, and especially as an economic and social force, tourism makes an indelible imprint on the lives of many around the world. Hence, 2017 has been designated by the UNWTO as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (figure 3).<sup>9</sup>

6 UNWTO. (2016). Global Report on the Transformative Power of Tourism: a paradigm shift towards a more responsible traveller. Madrid: United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

7 [http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto\\_barom17\\_01\\_january\\_excerpt\\_.pdf](http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto_barom17_01_january_excerpt_.pdf)

8 <http://www2.unwto.org/content/why-tourism>

9 <http://media.unwto.org/press-release/2017-01-19/international-year-sustainable-tourism-development-2017-kicks>

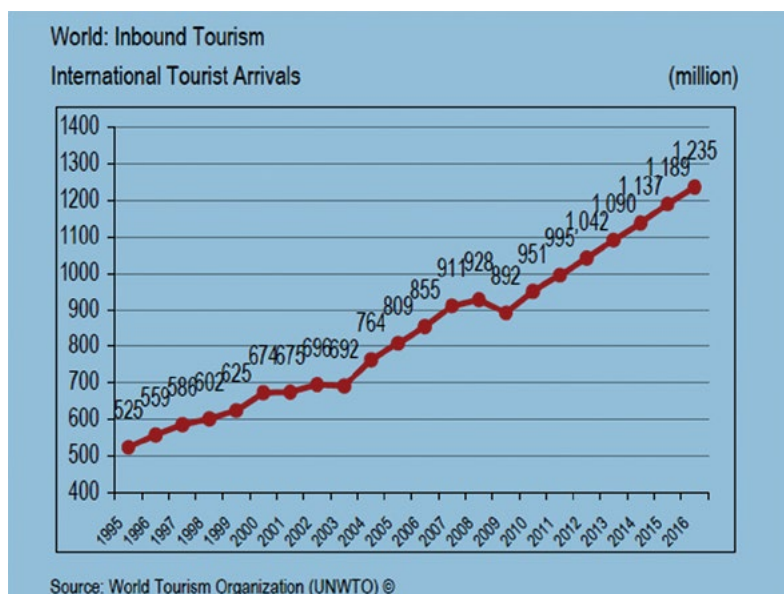


Figure 2: UNWTO World Tourism Barometer (Excerpt) January 2017 (Source: UNWTO, 2017)

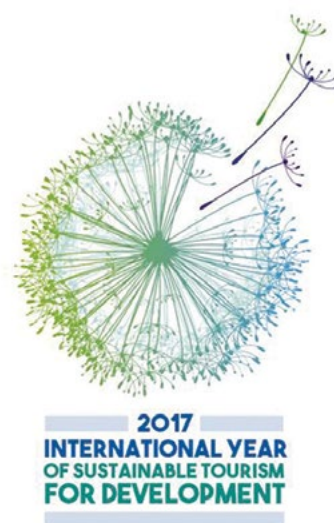


Figure 3: 2017 International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (Source: UNWTO, 2016)

Some of the other discernible trends in global tourism include:

1. The rise of the sharing economy, especially Air BnB and others of its ilk, is reshaping the way travellers make decisions.
2. International cruise tourism is the fastest growing sector leveraging the perception of on-board safety, price competitiveness and predictability and the ability to visit multiple destinations.
3. The rapid growth of Chinese outbound travel has had a profound impact on destinations, especially in East and Southeast Asia.
4. Continually heightened security measures at points of departure and arrival, and at major tourist attractions, in response to threats of terrorism.
5. Emergence of new destinations that were previously inaccessible due to prolonged political alienation.
6. Rise of voluntourism, and other forms of responsible travel motivated by the desire to contribute to poverty alleviation and development efforts.
7. The continuing development of technology in travel, which is reshaping consumer behaviour, travel information, and destination wayfinding.

## Defining sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism, as the term connotes, has its genesis in the 1987 *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, which is more popularly known as the *Brundtland Report*.<sup>10</sup> At the heart of the *Brundtland Report* is the central premise that whatever our consumptive behaviours are in the present, this should not compromise the integrity of the Earth's natural resources for the next and subsequent generations. The report was groundbreaking in its advocacy for policies that seek optimum levels for both natural and social concerns. As the commission emphasised: "The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs and attempts to defend it in isolation from human concerns have given the very word 'environment' a connotation of naivety in some political circles".

Sustainable tourism is the attempt to articulate how sustainable development may be applied in a tourism setting. Definitions of what exactly sustainable tourism is, however, have been difficult because it can be complex and multi-dimensional, heavily value laden, and oftentimes prone to politicisation and the advancement of special interest concerns. For example, the UNWTO provides a relatively simple definition of sustainable tourism as:<sup>11</sup>

Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.

There is a "triple-bottom line" (economy, society and environment) assertion in the UNWTO's framing of sustainable tourism, as well as the need to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders (present and future) are

accounted for. Based on this, three essential approaches to sustainable tourism have been identified as follows:

1. Maintaining stability and growth of tourism economic activities.
2. Greening the tourism industry by aligning its business activities (individual hotels, attractions, services) with the goals of sustainability; as is seen in Green Globe types of certification – the focus is on engineering solutions, although they have recently expanded somewhat into Corporate Social Responsibility.
3. Comprehensive approaches to sustainable development that involve the tourism industry, which ranges considerably from a purely conservation focus to an "everything under the sun" focus, and is reflected in the UNWTO definition.

In addition to the broad concept of sustainable tourism, there are numerous derivations from it that emphasise some aspects of the UNWTO definition more than others, or that are applied to specific types of attractions and settings. Among these are responsible tourism, voluntourism (volunteer tourism), community-based tourism, ecotourism, wildlife tourism, spiritual tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, slum tourism, hopeful tourism, event tourism, slow tourism, heritage tourism, social tourism, indigenous tourism, and a host of other niche types.

## Tourism Geographies

The banner of "Tourism Geographies" reflects the inherent geographical nature of tourism. In one of the foremost attempts to define the components of a tourism system, Neil Leiper outlined the following three key geographical elements (figure 4).<sup>12</sup>

1. The Tourist Generating Region – this consists of the key source markets from which tourists originate. In practice, this is largely linked to the availability of discretionary income to spend on travel, as well as accessibility to a destination region. This is why the vast majority of international tourists come out of the wealthier parts of Europe, North America and Northeast Asia.
2. The Tourist Destination Region – this is comprised of the destinations that have touristic value and supporting infrastructure to handle the needs of tourists, including accommodations, attractions and ancillary services. The most heavily visited destinations include those whose supporting services are easily accessible to the leading tourist generating regions.
3. Transit Routes – these are vital to tourism and travel operations, and include the infrastructure needed to facilitate tourist movement from the generating region to the destination region, as well as within these regions. In high demand travelled corridors, price competition and convenience facilitates the flows of tourists. The emergence of budget or low cost airlines since the 2000s is an example of this.

<sup>12</sup> Leiper, N. (1979). The framework of tourism: Towards a definition of tourism, tourist, and the tourist industry. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 6(4), 390-407.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://sdt.unwto.org/content/about-us-5>

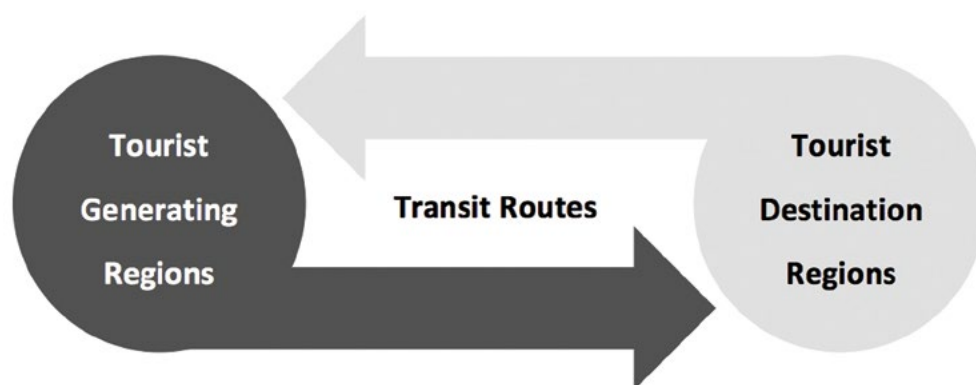


Figure 4: The Geographical Elements of tourism (Adapted from Leiper, 1979)<sup>1</sup>

1 Leiper, N. (1979). The framework of tourism: Towards a definition of tourism, tourist, and the tourist industry. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 6(4), 390-407.

While Leiper's depiction of the tourism system is somewhat rudimentary on face value, it highlights the tourism sector's dynamism and the forces of supply (in the destination region) and demand (in the origin region). In particular, Leiper's representation outlines the natural connection that the study of tourism has to Geography through the linkages of people to place, and across space and time.

This recognition has spawned the development of specialised academic journals, such as *Tourism Geographies*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Tourism Recreation Research* and *Tourism Planning & Development* – all of which have an innate connection to Geography discourses and wider multidisciplinary applications. Indeed, it is put that “place is also an intrinsic element of tourism, as all tourism involves some form of relationship between people and places that they call ‘home’ and ‘not home’ ... [and] what draws people to study geography and what draws them to study tourism is very closely related”.<sup>13</sup>

## Sustainable tourism contestations and paradoxes

One of the biggest criticisms of the sustainable tourism movement has been that it has had “little true or effective implementation.”<sup>14</sup> Because of the “paradoxes and inconsistencies” stemming from the definitions of the terms “tourism” and “sustainable”, the idea is criticised for “its application in the real world”.

The sustainability vs. profitability trade-off is another contested area. Although recognising the necessity to uphold environmental concerns, the tourism industry often views this as counterproductive to maximising its financial returns.<sup>15</sup> This is especially evident in the assessment of cruise tourism where ethical and social justice concerns are espoused by company executives, while questionable practices persist.<sup>16</sup>

Tourism and its stance toward climate change is also considered contentious, in part because of the “rudimentary state of knowledge about the relationships between tourism and climate change, an apathetic and

fickle travelling public and a reciprocally uncommitted (or superficially committed) tourism industry”.<sup>17</sup>

For example in the Pacific Islands, the links between rising sea levels and climate change is brought into stark relief. That these small, mostly low-lying islands are connected to actions (and inaction) around the globe and this highlights the interconnected nature of the world system. For Pacific island countries the urgencies for sustainable and resilient development are obvious, and where the reliance on tourism is great, this is intensified. Here, the turtle is the equivalent of the canary in the coal mine where its slow demise signals profound and troublesome impacts at play (figure 5).

By its very nature international tourism induces travel and, as noted previously, such movement is “almost entirely dependent on fossil fuel energy sources, which produce carbon emissions”.<sup>18</sup> In addition, very often the inputs that go into tourism cannot be locally sourced and therefore contributes to increasing carbon emissions.<sup>19</sup>

17 Weaver, D. (2011). Can sustainable tourism survive climate change? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(1), pp. 5–15.

18 Hollenhorst, S.J., Houge-Mackenzie, S. & Ostergren, D.M. (2014). The Trouble with tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 39(3), pp. 305–319.

19 Pratt, S. (2013). Minimising food miles: Issues and outcomes in an ecotourism venture in Fiji. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 21(8), pp. 1148–1165.



Figure 5: No Kilim Mama Totel (Don't kill the mother turtle) (Source: Cheer, 2008)

13 Lew, A.A. (1999). Editorial: A place called Tourism Geographies. *Tourism Geographies*, 1(1), 1–2.

14 Butler, R. (2015). Sustainable tourism: Paradoxes, inconsistencies and a way forward. In M. Hughes, D. Weaver & C. Pforr (Eds.), *The Practice of Sustainable Tourism: Resolving the Paradox* (pp. 66–80). London: Routledge.

15 Moeller, T., Dolnicar, S. & Leisch, F. (2010). The sustainability–profitability trade-off in tourism: can it be overcome? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(2), pp. 155–169.

16 <http://www.foe.org/cruise-report-card>

The impact on host communities from a heightened exposure to tourists and tourism is another conundrum, especially when the ability to adapt and join the tourism economy is constrained due to limited local skills and a dominance by external investors and interests.<sup>20</sup> Another concern is the extent to which marginalised groups are alienated, especially in less developed and indigenous contexts, through mistreatment, displacement and disregard.<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding arguments against the viability of sustainable tourism, tourism's ability to induce positive economic benefits remains its principal clarion call.<sup>22</sup> In acknowledging this, the UNWTO highlights the transformative power of tourism's potential to make positive triple-bottom line impacts by suggesting that "1 billion tourists creates 1 billion opportunities" for the creation of jobs, micro enterprises, and by giving communities greater empowerment.<sup>23</sup>

## Tourism in the Anthropocene: from sustainable to resilient tourism

The dawn of the Anthropocene epoch has given greater urgency to the discussion concerning the sustainability of tourism in all its forms.<sup>24</sup> The notion of "futura" (or future time) is at the heart of broader Anthropocene discourses, and to ensure that this is addressed in tourism is argued to be essential. In the end, "if tourism is to be consistent with the principles of sustainable development then, logically, both the developmental and sustainability objectives of tourism should reflect those of sustainable development".<sup>25</sup>

As Sharpley points out, however, the principles of sustainable development itself continue to be "a morally desirable but fundamentally idealistic and impractical objective". If Sharpley's position is true (and many think it is), then perhaps the more important question is: How can the conceptualisation of sustainable tourism be made less idealistic and more practical and realistic?

Recent interest in the relationship of tourism to the emerging fields of resilience thinking and resilient development is seen by some scholars as a plausible segue to addressing the shortcomings of sustainable tourism.<sup>26</sup> The underpinnings of tourism resilience lie in the recognition that the human and the environmental are an inseparable social-ecological entity.<sup>27</sup>

In applying social-ecological resilience thinking to tourism, the assertion is that "a resilience thinking approach tries to investigate how these interacting systems of people

20 Cheer, J.M., Reeves, K.J. & Laing, J.H. (2013). Tourism and Traditional Culture: Land Diving in Vanuatu. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 43, pp. 435–455.

21 Crick, M. (1989). Representations of International Tourism in the Social Sciences: Sun, Sex, Sights, Savings, and Servility. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 18, pp. 307–344.

22 Schubert, S.F., Brida, J.G. & Risso, W.A. (2011). The impacts of international tourism demand on economic growth of small economies dependent on tourism. *Tourism Management*, 32(2), pp. 377–385.

23 UNWTO. (2016). Global Report on the Transformative Power of Tourism: a paradigm shift towards a more responsible traveller. Madrid: United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

24 Gren, M. & Huijbens, E.H. (2014). Tourism and the Anthropocene. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 14(1), pp. 6–22.

25 Sharpley, R. (2009). *Tourism development and the environment: Beyond sustainability?* London: Earthscan.

26 Lew, A. A. (2014). Scale, change and resilience in community tourism planning. *Tourism Geographies*, 16(1), pp. 14–22.

27 Folke, C. (2006). Resilience: the emergence of a perspective for social-ecological systems analyses. *Global environmental change*, 16(3), pp. 253–267

and nature – or social-ecological systems – can best be managed to ensure a sustainable and resilient supply of the essential ecosystem services on which humanity depends".<sup>28</sup> The implication for tourism resilience is in acknowledging that tourism is part of the full array of "geophysical forces that characterise the Anthropocene".<sup>29</sup> Thus, it is incumbent on the tourism sector's stakeholders to recognise this relationship and to mitigate adverse impacts and promote positive impact in shaping the very things that tourists come to see.

Applying resilience approaches involves building adaptive capacities in tourism places that will help tourism stakeholders respond to the array of changes and shocks that they encounter. In particular, resilience "is equated to transformation and the qualities of major change, anticipatory pre-action, and creating a new and open-ended order".<sup>30</sup>

Resilience thinking is not a replacement for sustainability, but is a complementary advance on it that acknowledges the synergies that each brings to the social-ecological resilience endeavour.<sup>31</sup> In this approach, sustainability addresses those aspects of the community where the primary policy is to protect and conserve, whereas resilience is applied to those areas where adaptation, innovation and possibly transformation are the desired outcomes.

This is arguably a more realistic and practical approach, acknowledging that tourism places will experience change, which will sometime happen very quickly, and at other times very slowly. In addition, some changes will have broad, community-wide impacts, while others will be more narrowly focussed.

Lew's Scale, Change and Resilience (SCR) model shows how the development of adaptive capacities rests on four key system responses: (1) Management, (2) Resources, (3) Planning and (4) Governance. Each response is shaped by the scale that it encompasses and its rate of change. In the figure below, the System would be the community scale and the Subsystem would be the tourism sector within the community. By understanding the scale and rate of change, appropriate system responses can be developed and employed.

In the shift from a predominant focus on sustainable tourism to one that includes tourism resilience, the proposition is that rather than relying on the futility of there being "a massive change in both supply and demand to make the operation of tourism enterprises, facilities and participants significantly more sustainable",<sup>32</sup> tourism stakeholders can aim to shape their existences and develop their capacities to meet the impinging forces of change in practical and realistic ways.

28 Center, S.R. (2015). Applying resilience thinking: Seven principles for building resilience in social-ecological systems (pp. 20). Stockholm: Stockholm Resilience Centre.

29 Gren, M. & Huijbens, E.H. (2014). Tourism and the Anthropocene. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 14(1), pp. 6–22.

30 Lew, A. A., Ng, P. T., Ni, C.-c., & Wu, T.-c. (2016). Community sustainability and resilience: similarities, differences and indicators. *Tourism Geographies*, 18(1), pp. 18–27.

31 Anderies, J., Folke, C., Walker, B. & Ostrom, E. (2013). Aligning key concepts for global change policy: robustness, resilience, and sustainability. *Ecology and Society*, 18(2).

32 Butler, R. (2015). Sustainable tourism: Paradoxes, inconsistencies and a way forward. In M. Hughes, D. Weaver & C. Pforr (Eds.), *The Practice of Sustainable Tourism: Resolving the Paradox* (pp. 66–80). London: Routledge.



Figure 6: The scale change and resilience (SCR) of system response to disturbance and change (Lew, 2017)

## Conclusion

Sustainable tourism development, and sustainable development in general, is subject to compounding criticism on the basis that there is great deal of “fiddling while Rome burns”. Trying to gain an internationally unified approach to climate change is an example of this. A growing opinion is that for tourism to become truly sustainable a major rethink is needed, especially if indeed “tourism hides its unsustainability behind a mask that is all more beguiling because it appears so sustainable”.<sup>33</sup>

Notwithstanding such criticisms, the UNWTO’s boosterism perspective very predictably posits that “tourism is much more than a leisure activity; tourism holds an immense potential to set new paradigms of thinking, to encourage social and cultural changes and to inspire a more sustainable behavior”.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while preaching sustainability on the one hand, it celebrates skyrocketing numbers of international travellers on the other hand.

The noted tourism geographer, Richard Butler, frames this apparent contradiction in terms of balance. He states that, “If sustainable development and tourism has a triple bottom line, then one of those lines is economics and it cannot be ignored in favour of either or both environmental or social/cultural pressures, any more than the economic argument can be allowed to take precedence over other viewpoints”.<sup>35</sup>

It must be noted that resilience thinking is also prone to criticisms over its hidden links to the neoliberal ideals of development. Critics contend that it gives licence to increase the development exploitation of natural and human resources, over concerns for conservation and resource restoration.<sup>36</sup> This is another reason why a

33 Hollenhorst, S.J., Houge-Mackenzie, S. & Ostergren, D.M. (2014). The Trouble with tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 39(3), pp. 305–319.

34 UNWTO. (2016). *Global Report on the Transformative Power of Tourism: a paradigm shift towards a more responsible traveller*. Madrid: United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

35 Butler, R. (2015). Sustainable tourism: Paradoxes, inconsistencies and a way forward. In M. Hughes, D. Weaver & C. Pforr (Eds.), *The Practice of Sustainable Tourism: Resolving the Paradox* (pp. 66–80). London: Routledge.

36 Lew, A.A., Ng, P.T., Ni, C.-c. & Wu, T.-c. (2016). Community sustainability and resilience: similarities, differences and indicators. *Tourism Geographies*, 18(1), pp. 18–27.

sustainable tourism approach needs to be coupled with a tourism resilience approach as a way of balancing thoughtful conservation and intelligent development.

Sustainable tourism is by no means a moot point – its articulations still deserve great weight. However, embracing resilience thinking for tourism development might offer policy, planning and practice a more workable framework that recognises the certainty of changeability, and acknowledges the need for adaptation, rather than giving a disproportionate focus to mitigation and cessation (sustainability). This is a more practicable approach to the planning and management of tourism’s continual global growth and global reach.

### Possible additional resources:

1. *Tourism Geography*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (2014, Routledge) by Stephen Williams and Alan A. Lew – website resources free to use: <http://www.tourismgeography.com/>
2. The Collaborative for Sustainable Tourism and Resilience Communities – website with a resources page, blog and sustainable tourism and tourism resilience news items: <http://www.tourismcommunities.com/>
3. *Tourism Geographies* journal: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtxg20>

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### Endnote

The authors of this article have two books forthcoming that are related to wider thinking on sustainable tourism and tourism resilience. Book contents can be viewed on the TourismCommunities.com website.

Lew, A.A. & Cheer, J.M. (Eds.) (2017) *Tourism Resilience and Adaptation to Environmental Change*. London: Routledge.

Cheer, J.M. & Lew, A.A. (Eds.) (2017) *Tourism Resilience and Sustainability: Adapting to Social, Political and Economic Change*. London: Routledge.