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# **DETERMINING THE TRANSITION TO A MORE SUSTAINABLE FORM OF TOURISM\***

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## **Abstract**

*Tourism is constantly undergoing change and in recent years one of the most significant characteristics of that change has been the move towards sustainable forms of tourism. This paper discusses the issues involved in moving tourism towards sustainability, arguing that a destination specific approach is essential and that local involvement in deciding what are sustainable tourism objectives is equally important. The paper then discusses issues relating to carrying capacity in tourism destinations and the links between this concept and sustainability. It then examines the problem of identifying indicators of movement towards or away from sustainability and how these can be selected and implemented at the destination level. An example of such a process is discussed and the lessons that can be drawn from this case are reviewed. The paper concludes with a re-emphasis of the importance of tackling movement towards sustainability at the destination or local level.*

**Key words:** *tourism, sustainability, indicators, monitoring, destinations, capacity.*

## **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**

It is likely that there is no subject which has attracted as much attention in the last two decades as sustainable development. The term sustainability first achieved prominence in the World Conservation Strategy [1], and led directly to the concept of

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sustainable development. From its first annunciation in 1987 in the report of the Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, [2] that concept has received widespread support from political, economic and environmental quarters and succeeded in uniting these very separate viewpoints in general agreement over adoption of the principles of the concept. It has become very clear, however, that this support is more often in principle than in practice, and that implementation of these principles has generally been slow to materialise. A large number of conferences, often at the highest level, such as the Rio Summit, have taken place and innumerable reports and publications have since appeared, espousing the principles and arguing for their application in all aspects of life. Tourism has been seen as highly suitable for receiving the application of the principles of sustainable tourism, often because it is generally, but inaccurately argued that tourism is dependent on a pristine natural environment for its success and can therefore benefit greatly from sustainable development [3]. While some forms of tourism do indeed need a high quality natural environment, other forms of tourism such as cultural and urban tourism rely on other attractions to draw people to those destinations.

There can be little argument that the application of the principles of sustainable development make excellent sense in a world which at times seems bent on exhausting or ruining its natural resources with scant regard for the consequences of such action or of the well-being quickly of future generations. The adoption of these principles in the context of tourism development is equally sensible and desirable. The acceptance, and even the implementation of such a philosophy, however, does not mean that tourism destinations and resources would not still face problems from many of the impacts which they currently experience. Sustainable development and, in the tourism context, sustainable tourism, does not mean that impacts will not occur. Rather, the concept means that impacts which do occur will not threaten the permanent well-being of the environment in which they take place [4]. Change as a result of development is almost always inevitable, indeed, economic change at least is often a highly desired occurrence and frequently the basic reason for the development of tourism in the first place. Impact or change in the environmental and social/cultural aspects of destinations is also highly likely, if not certain. The key is to ensure as far as possible, that any change or impacts which do occur are of the right type, i.e., positive impacts, and when negative impacts occur, that they are minimised and controlled to the greatest degree possible.

It is important to understand, however, that sustainable tourism, by itself, does not necessarily imply fewer negative impacts nor more positive impacts in absolute terms. The goals of sustainable tourism, if achieved, should have the effect of reducing the level of negative impacts such that their effect will not be permanent or threaten the survival of the environments affected, and ensuring that the positive impacts will be felt by local communities and populations, as well as at a national level. There are, however, certain issues which have to be acknowledged and resolved. Many authors (see, for example, [5], [6], [7], [8] ) have noted that the treatment of sustainable development and sustainable tourism has often been overly simplistic and assumptions about adoption and implementation naive and incorrect.

Sustainable development is a global concept, and when examined closely, it is clear that this implies that complete achievability is only possible at the global level. To expect to achieve sustainability at the sectoral level is inappropriate and unrealistic, as individual sectors can never achieve true sustainability or sustainable development in isolation from other sectors and the global environment. Sustainability can be thought of at the sectoral level only in terms of achievement of a *degree* of sustainability. In the context of tourism this could be both at the general industry level and for specific destinations. The argument put forward in this paper is that completely sustainable tourism cannot be achieved unless the global environment as a whole and all of its sectors have also achieved complete sustainability. In the same vein, to describe individual operations or developments as being sustainable, in the context of tourism or any other sector, is almost inevitably inaccurate and misleading. A tourism enterprise cannot be sustainable on its own because it is too dependent on, and inter-related to, other sectors. One obvious example of this misconception is what are called sustainable ecotourism lodges. While such an enterprise itself may follow closely sustainable principles in its *operation*, it is highly unlikely that it does not involve inputs from other sectors, not all of which are likely to be completely sustainable. In particular, its marketing and promotion will almost certainly involve unsustainable elements, such as energy, even if marketing is done on the world wide web only and uses no paper and ink. Most importantly, perhaps, visitors to such an enterprise will almost certainly use transportation which is not sustainable, particularly if they are coming from long distances away. Thus while the local operation of the enterprise may be along sustainable principles, the enterprise itself cannot be accurately called a sustainable operation in the true sense of the term. Furthermore, as sustainable development is a concept which involves operation in the appropriate manner over a long time scale, it would be necessary to wait many more years before any specific enterprise could be definitively stated to be sustainable.

## **CARRYING CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

The concept of sustainable development has, at its core, the principle of living and operating with the limits of the environment (destination) in which development is taking place, in other words, maintaining use at or below the level of the carrying capacity of that destination. In the fields of recreation and tourism there has been considerable research on carrying capacity and its application to visitor destinations. One of the approaches to dealing with overuse and undesirable impacts has been the identification of carrying capacity limits, on the assumption that determining the ability of an area to withstand use without irreparable damage or change allows managers to maximise potential without ruining the basic capital or reserves of the area. This is a basic ecological concept and has its origins in animal husbandry, with attempts to answer the critical question of how many grazing animals could an area tolerate before it was overtaxed and its ability to regenerate its resources destroyed. In the 1960s this



concept was first applied to extensive recreation and tourist areas which were beginning to experience overuse with resulting negative impacts on vegetation and wildlife [9]. Three key findings emerged. First, there is rarely, if ever, a single specific number of visitors which can be identified as the carrying capacity limit because impacts vary with visitor behaviour. Second, any levels of use which could be identified as critical were rarely transportable to other areas because of variations in environmental as well as visitor characteristics. Third, unlike the agricultural situation, there was an additional and much more problematic element in the equation, namely, visitor perceptions of the quality of the experience. Thus from overly simplistic early estimates of maximum numbers, attention shifted to meeting visitor preferences and management capabilities, and concepts such as the Limits of Acceptable Change [10] became popular alternatives approaches for the management of specific areas.

In the context of tourism areas, compared to extensive recreation areas, however, carrying capacity has been inadequately studied and almost universally ignored, despite early efforts in the 1960s [11]. Two additional problems make the use of the carrying capacity concept even more difficult in the context of tourism. First, there is normally a resident population in most tourism destinations, and this population has its own, often quite separate and often divided, opinions on acceptable capacity limits in terms of tourist numbers and impacts. Second, despite the common use of the term 'tourism management', there is in reality, very little management of tourism in most tourism destinations or regions. There is tourism promotion, marketing and development, but once established, very little specific management of tourists or tourism. This is a reflection on the nature of tourism, which is primarily a private sector operation involving very large numbers of mostly small and medium sized operators, with little overall control being capable of being exerted by any body, other than normal planning and other regulations that apply to most forms of economic activity. Thus to even determine, let alone apply, carrying capacity limits in most tourism destinations is next to impossible because of the mix of tourists, the nature of the industry, the mix of local opinions and desires, and the lack of overall control of tourism. Only in a very few places, normally at the specific community level, have limits or controls on tourist numbers been implemented. Potential loss of tourism receipts (and with that a decline in employment and tax revenue) from smaller numbers of visitors, either because of specific controls on numbers or fear of tourism rejection of the destination because of the imposition of limits on numbers, has prevented most destinations identifying and imposing carrying capacity limits. Without such limits, the reality is that successful handling of impacts is highly unlikely and significant movement towards sustainability limited at best.

An additional major problem which has to be faced in the context of dealing with the impacts of tourism is that much planning for development is undertaken at the national or regional levels, and reality is that these are rarely appropriate levels at which to examine or control the impacts of tourism. It is almost impossible to identify impacts and elements such as carrying capacity at a national or regional level, where boundaries



may be extremely porous and generally fit only administrative and political convenience, rather than the realities of leisure travel in the twenty-first century. It is important to note, that at least as far as tourism is concerned, planning and development at the regional level in most cases is often not particularly effective with respect to impact control and mitigation as Airey and Butler [12] have discussed at some length elsewhere. The reason for this being that tourism is concerned with flows of tourists, and flows are to destinations, not to regions in the vast majority of cases. More importantly, impacts take place at the destination level, at specific sites and locations on the routes to and from these destinations, and at the origins of visitors. To attempt to identify impacts, let alone mitigate and control them, at a national or regional level has little base in reality.

If we are to truly understand tourism and its impacts, and be successful in managing those impacts, it is necessary to work at the local level rather than the national or regional level. Thus, while national or regional development programmes of investment and aid may work in the context of *promoting* tourism,

“the regional level is not one that relates well to either tourist demand or to the suppliers of tourist services....When it comes to the tourists and the tourist industry the regional framework looks as ill-suited to handle tourist development as it always has done. Tourists do not normally visit tourist regions and the industry does not organise itself on a regional basis...tourism has to be understood at the local, destination level.” (Airey and Butler, 1999: 86-87).

If this argument is accepted, then carrying capacity delineation and impact assessment, monitoring, and management has to be conducted in the first instance at the destination and site level and not at the regional or national level. Thus there needs to be very clear arrangements to research, study and manage tourism at the local destination level if any movement towards more sustainable forms of tourism is to be achieved. This has particular relevance in the context of relating such research to sustainable tourism development.

## MONITORING PROGRESS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM

The arguments made above about defining carrying capacity limits and impact assessment are important but in the context of sustainable development, it must be acknowledged that what really matters in relation to tourism, is that the industry moves *towards* sustainability and not away from this goal. To that end it is essential that society is in a position to determine whether any enterprise or destination is moving towards or away from sustainability, however that may be defined. This leads the discussion to the issue of how to measure such progress and in turn to the problem of identifying potential indicators of sustainability. Despite considerable discussion about indicators of sustainability in the context of tourism, led by bodies such as the World Tourism Organisation, there has been relatively little achieved in determining specific indicators

which could be used at a local or even a regional level. If such measures are to be widely adopted and used, indicators need to be easily obtained if they are not already available, to be based on objective, reliable and quantitative data, to be widely applicable, and to be easily understood by a wide segment of the industry and the public, as discussed in more detail below.

The United Nations established a list of some 130 indicators of sustainable development, and the World Tourism Organisation [13], [14] has several publications dealing with indicators applicable to sustainable tourism. Unfortunately, widespread use of these indicators is not common. Part of the reason for this is the fact that many of these indicators are best, or in some cases only, suited for use at a national or regional level, while many impacts and changes occur initially or solely at the local level. Statistics which indicate, for example, national level improvement in percentages of hotels which employ local resident staff, may mask very real reverses in the local employment patterns in specific destinations. The practice of "thinking globally, acting locally" applies as equally to the indicators of sustainability as it does to the general principles of sustainability.

Monitoring is a process of undertaking regular measurements of one or more phenomena in order to assess change over time. Monitoring is crucial to sustainable tourism development as it provides the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of new policies and strategies, to identify the most successful and most appropriate ones, and to draw attention to problems before they cause irreversible adverse effects. It is appropriate, therefore, to refer to developments in monitoring sustainable development for assistance in developing specific monitoring programmes in the context of tourism. Designing monitoring systems for sustainable development is problematic, however, not only because of the multi-disciplinary focus needed but also because of the difficulty in separating causes from effects, and both of these issues apply with equal validity in the context of sustainable tourism development. As a result of these problems, progress on the ground has so far been limited.

Monitoring was identified by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, as an essential part of the implementation process for sustainable development [15]. The International Institute of Sustainable Development (IISD) noted that it was:

"an indispensable tool to make the concept of sustainable development operational, it helps decision-makers and the public to conceptualize objectives, evaluate alternatives, make policy choices, and adjust policies as well as objectives based on actual performance." (IISD 1997: on line)

The Commission for Sustainable Development (UNCSD) was given the responsibility of developing internationally comparable monitoring standards for sustainable development [16]. The initial results from the programme that was instituted were published in 1996 in a volume entitled *Indicators of Sustainable Development Framework and Methodologies* [17]. This report provides an initial list of some 130 core indicators that were intended to assist decision-making at the national level about

sustainable development. As a result of the work of the UNCSO, indicators are now generally accepted as essential tools for monitoring progress towards sustainable development.

In recent years tourism researchers in increasing numbers also have been advocating the need for indicators to monitor the sustainability of tourism (see, for example, [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23]). WTTC et al. [23], for example, claim the establishment of realistic sustainable tourism indicators to be a top priority for national tourism organisations. The relative absence of reliable indicators in tourism is a serious problem, and Weaver [22] has argued that the successful implementation of sustainable tourism has been impeded by the current unsophisticated state of understanding with regards to indicators.

Despite the general agreement over the need for such measures, however, research on sustainable tourism indicators is still in its incipient stages and effective practical case studies are hard to find in the literature. The most significant attempt so far to develop indicators of sustainable tourism has been undertaken by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) through its Environment Task Force [24], [25], [14]. The WTO [14] project aimed to develop a set of internationally acceptable indicators for sustainable tourism that would assist tourism managers and others in their decision-making processes. The result was eleven core indicators (WTO [14]). Of these eleven, three involve planning and administration, three relate to tourism numbers (in terms of absolute numbers, ratio and intensity respectively), two involve measures of satisfaction (of tourists and locals), one involves wildlife, one is economic, and one is a measure of pollution treatment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

WTO Core Indicators of Sustainable Tourism

Category of site protection according to IUCN	Existence of organised regional plan for tourism
Tourist numbers visiting a site (per annum/peak month)	Number of rare/edangered species
Intensity of use in peak periods (persond per hectare)	Level of satisfaction by visitors
Ratio of tourists to locals (peak period and over time)	Level of satisfaction by locals
Existence of environmental reviews procedure or formal site controls	Proportion of total economic activity generated by tourism.
Percentage of sewage from site receiving treatment	

Source: After WTO, (1996)

While the work of the WTO provides a useful starting point, some methodological issues still need to be resolved. First, one may argue that rather than



taking an integrated approach to sustainability, which in the literature is commonly stated as essential, the indicators identified by WTO focus rather exclusively on separate aspects of the impacts of tourism. Second, although conclusions of research on sustainable development suggest public participation in the development of indicators is crucial to their success, there appears to be relatively little opportunity for stakeholder involvement in the development of the WTO indicators and only one indicator directly reflects local attitudes. Third, as research has shown that the key issues and influences which affect the sustainable development of tourism in destination areas can vary dramatically, depending on the environment, culture, and stage of tourism development, it can be argued that sustainable tourism indicators need to be destination specific. This is a time consuming and difficult task, as an examination of the steps and policies suggested as necessary to develop an action strategy for sustainable tourism development noted after the Globe 90 conference in Vancouver will reveal [26]. Although the goal of establishing what are felt to be universally applicable sustainable tourism indicators can be seen to have considerably promotional appeal to a global organisation such as WTO, the usefulness of such measures in reality is questionable.

### **DEVELOPING A MONITORING PROGRAMME**

If indicators are to accurately reflect and include local input, it is inevitable that they have to be destination specific and developed in conjunction with, if not by, representatives of the local communities involved in tourism. The following section briefly discusses the development and use of indicators of sustainable tourism development in a specific destination (the South Pacific island state of Samoa) to illustrate a potential approach to this problem. The work in Samoa was undertaken as a collaborative project from the University of Surrey with the Samoa Visitors Bureau, and was funded as part of the New Zealand Official Development Assistance (NZODA) Samoa Tourism Programme [27]. The initial planning of the project and the subsequent research design which was adopted was based on three assumptions. These have been discussed above and are: the need to develop an integrated approach for indicator selection and application; the need to include local community representation participation in the development of the indicators; and the necessity of ensuring that the indicators were destination-specific in their suitability. Before going further it is appropriate to outline briefly the background and approach by which the indicators were developed.

Five stages were involved in the development of the sustainable tourism indicators. The first was planning, which was necessary to ensure sufficient time and resources were available to allow for the completion of the project. This included developing the research plan and establishing an Advisory Committee of local representatives. The second stage involved the development of objectives which provided the project framework. This stage allowed the collecting of information to ensure the effective identification of what sustainable tourism meant in the context of Samoa, and to identify what needed to be monitored. The third stage dealt with the

selection of indicators, which was done on the basis of their ability to accurately and consistently measure progress towards the specific sustainable tourism development objectives and an initial screening or filtering of indicators. At the fourth stage the indicators were pilot tested in order to ensure their viability and to establish baseline measurements. This stage involved consulting on the indicators, defining them, and collecting data. The fifth and final stage saw the first round of indicator results undergo interpretation and the establishment of an implementation framework. This was set up in order to bridge the gap between monitoring progress and subsequent action. In this example, this process took some fifteen months. At the present time the project is now in the implementation phase and the indicators and their monitoring have become essential components in the planning and development of sustainable tourism in Samoa.

Ensuring an integrated approach requires expertise and credibility not only in tourism but in related fields. An advisory or overseeing committee with a multidisciplinary membership is regarded as essential for this process to work. If such a group is well chosen, it can provide not only the necessary expertise in the related fields but also credible stakeholder input which is important in the context of selecting destination specific indicators. The identification of appropriate and acceptable indicators involves the identification of key issues relating to the environment, the economy, the society and culture of the destination area, as well as the nature and scale of the tourism development existing and planned. If the basic principles of sustainable development are to be upheld, informed local input in this process is essential, as not only must the appropriate elements be monitored but they must be seen and agreed to be the appropriate elements.

The selection of indicators is not an easy process. According to the UNCSD, indicators should be understandable, realisable, conceptually well-founded, limited in number, broad in their coverage and dependent on data that is readily available [17]. Indicators need to be long-term and practical in focus, developed through broad participation and secured by institutional capacity [28]. The WTO [14] recommends similar criteria for the selection of sustainable tourism indicators identifying; data availability; credibility; simplicity; the ability to show trends over time; and having known threshold values as core indicator values. In the case of Samoa, an initial two hundred and seventy nine indicators were reduced, following discussion and evaluation, to seventy five for more detailed screening. Screening in this case involved firstly, evaluation for technical feasibility and secondly for user friendliness. Pilot testing allows for the appropriateness and suitability of indicators to be determined. After this, further evaluation by the advisory committee can allow for removal, replacement and addition of indicators as the situation dictates and a final nineteen indicators were chosen and used. Once the indicators have been identified and accepted the next challenge involves interpreting the results from their application. If destination specific indicators are used, as is supported by the literature, this may mean that the data resulting may not have been collected previously and no yardsticks may exist by which to compare results. Consequently, it may be necessary to establish a series of ranges of acceptable levels

which could act as a guide to indicator performances. These ranges could be established on the basis of indicator results, experience from other destinations, and the advice of experts in the appropriate fields. Results from the application of indicators can then be compared with the acceptable range and it can be determined if corrective action is needed to ensure that movement is towards sustainability rather than away from this goal.

An essential element in the process of ensuring progress towards sustainable tourism development is determining what are appropriate objectives. Measurement and monitoring by themselves achieve little if the purpose is not clear and consistent. In these days many governments, national tourism organisations and individual enterprises claim sustainability as a core aspiration, but without clear objectives it is very difficult to design a sustainable tourism action programme and monitor progress. The actual process of establishing appropriate sustainable tourism development objectives in the context of a specific destination, therefore, has a much wider range of potential uses than purely for monitoring tourism development. In many respects it is crucial to ensure that sustainable tourism development is not treated as one distinct and often minor element in tourism planning and development. If governments and national tourism organisations are serious about moving towards, let alone achieving, sustainable tourism development as many claim, they need to place defined objectives as the basis for the approach to the development of tourism in their respective countries.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that sustainable tourism development has to be viewed as a part of sustainable development and that achieving such a state is only possible at the level of the global environmental system. In the context of tourism the paper has maintained that what is important is *movement towards* a state of sustainability, and of equal importance is the need to measure and monitor such progress. It has looked at the importance of monitoring and how the development of sustainable tourism indicators can provide an effective means of designing, prioritising and helping achieve specific sustainable tourism development.

The importance of adopting an integrated approach to sustainable tourism development and planning is essential; linkages must be established and maintained between the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural, as well as the purely tourism, issues facing a destination. The importance of stakeholder participation is equally important if the principles of sustainable development are to be incorporated and upheld in the context of tourism development, although this does not mean that national and international needs can be ignored. The development of clear objectives for achieving a more sustainable form of tourism development can and should be used to effectively set the parameters for destination-specific indicators. Such indicators should be capable of identifying the need for corrective action to ensure progress towards, rather than regression from, a state of sustainability, and lead to such appropriate action being taken when the situation arises. Implicit in this process is the assumption that the identification



and operationalisation of indicators is matched by a sincere desire to actually move towards a more sustainable form of tourism. Such resolve has to be demonstrated not only in political statements and policies, but in action when this is warranted.

Although it is acknowledged that developing indicators of sustainable tourism development at a national level in an integrated, participatory and destination specific manner can be a complex, lengthy, and expensive task, it is argued that such actions can have much wider benefits than simply monitoring. Rather than attempting to develop indicators that are applicable to all situations at all scales, it is recommended that further work continue on the development of a methodology that can be adapted for use in a wide range of locations. Such a methodology would allow stakeholders to develop and monitor their own destination specific indicators, and in the process, effectively set an agenda for moving towards the sustainable development of tourism in their locations. This is a call for an agenda which local tourism authorities, tourism business communities, and local residents have ownership of, responsibility for, and commitment to. Building from the local level towards the regional and national levels is likely to see more significant progress towards sustainability in tourism than general and often politically motivated statements from the top down. It is movement towards sustainability from the local to the global which is likely to yield greater rewards. The impacts of tourism begin and are experienced at the local or destination level, and it is here that the wars must be fought, if the battle is to be won at the global level.

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## **DEFINIRANJE TRANZICIJE KA VIŠEM STUPNJU ODRŽIVOG TURIZMA**

### **Sažetak**

*Turizam neprestano doživljava promjene, a u posljednje vrijeme jedna od najvažnijih značajki ovih promjena je usmjerenje ka održivom obliku turizma. Rad obrađuje teme vezane za održivi razvitak turizma, dokazujući da je nužan specifičan pristup destinaciji. Ne manje značajne su odluke lokalnih jedinica uprave o tome koji su ciljevi održivog turizma. Rad potom obrađuje teme vezane za prijemni kapacitet u turističkim destinacijama i veze između ovog koncepta i održivosti. Zatim istražuje problem određivanja čimbenika koji pospješuju ili usporavaju održivost, a ujedno i mogućnost odabiranja i primjene istih na nivou destinacije. Istražen je odabrani primjer i posljedice koje su proizašle iz ovakvog procesa. U zaključku rada ponovno je naglašena važnost usmjerenja ka održivosti na destinacijskoj ili lokalnoj razini.*

**Ključne riječi:** turizam, održivost, čimbenici, monitoring, destinacije, kapacitet.

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