
Book Review

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A Research Agenda for Sustainable Tourism

by: Stephen F. McCool and Keith Bosak

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The book is a wonderful compilation of literature containing chapters that identify information challenges, research gaps, questions and possible opportunities for sustainable tourism along with topics that are applicable across different contexts (social, political or geographical) allowing a better understanding of the functionality and management of tourism-related systems in the face of change. Besides covering political-ecology and environmental aspects of sustainable tourism research such as climate change, protected area management, negative environmental impacts, land ownership, governance and institutional capacity and resource scarcity, the book also addresses socio-cultural issues such as integration, inclusivity, poverty alleviation, acculturation, commodification of local traditions, health and social well-being, etc. Most of the chapters question the assumptions underpinning the concept of sustainability that revolve around the fundamental question of “what is it that tourism sustains” and how tourism research could be holistic and contribute towards enhancing resilience of systems. The underlying theme across all the chapters is adopting a systems approach and the setting out of a research agenda for sustainable tourism that is critical, reflective and innovative. The 15 chapters cover a broad representation of theoretical models, approaches, practical challenges, managerial concerns and research questions related to sustainable tourism, supported by an in-depth literature review, contextually driven case-studies and a discussion of research implications and future possibilities.

The first chapter begins by broadly discussing the forces acting upon tourism destinations, how current conventional and reductionist research paradigms are insufficient to address the complexities and ‘wicked’ problems associated with tourism development and how a systems thinking approach could be considered as a possible approach. A socio-ecological-systems (SES) approach in tourism research is again advocated in Chapter 2 that considers tourism as a self-organising system with emergent properties occurring at multiple scales and a part of various feedback loops. Chapter 3 and 4 examine the concept of resilience as an inherent dimension of the sustainability discourse in the context of regional livelihoods by not only highlighting the

need for sustainable tourism planning to include resilience in order to cope with complexity, uncertainty and change but also by illustrating how context can influence such planning processes. In doing so, Chapter 4 also mentions power relations and cultural values among different actors involved in the planning process and drivers of change to socio-ecological systems.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the experiential dimension of tourist behaviour within sustainable tourism and the complex and uncertain challenges associated with it. Chapter 5 discusses recreation experience preferences and outcomes-focused management as approaches to understanding the tourist experience along with a description of different visitor use management frameworks in sustainable tourism settings. The authors put forth some relevant questions for management-by-objective (MBO) frameworks in terms of their applicability at different scales and cultural contexts, understanding thresholds among visitors, capacity for visitor use management and adaptive management through a double-loop learning process. They call for further research into MBO frameworks to ensure replicability, adaptability and holistic management. Chapter 6 again highlights the need for a systems approach using an epistemological perspective and describes a destination community well-being (DCW) approach to sustainability that takes into consideration the different forms of capital (natural, social, cultural, political, built, financial) for the well-being of both individuals and communities. It discusses the way destination management organisations (DMOs) create, promote and manage the experience opportunities offered to tourists in destinations and how tourism sustainability at a destination can be enhanced through a focus on building community capacity, fostering stronger relationships with destination residents and engaging in sustainability marketing.

While Chapter 7 identifies impacts of climate change on global tourism and critical knowledge gaps for tourism to become decarbonised and resilient, Chapter 8 illustrates how tourism contributes to the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) based on review of past literature and good practice examples by tourism operators, groups and destinations. This is followed by a discussion of sustainable business models, their functionality, operationalisation and research gaps in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 follows the principle of enhancing resilience in proposing an integration of human health concepts and considerations in tourism planning and research across different settings by exploring the health outcomes of intertwined social, economic and ecological systems for visitors, residents and workers using a conceptual framework.

Chapter 11 explores the managerial challenges, information needs, critical themes and future directions associated with protected area tourism under five research domains (social-ecological interactions; visitation trends; visitor experiences and benefits; community and culture; and governance, planning and sustainability monitoring) that represent an encompassing view of sustainability. Chapter 12 builds on the theme of resilience, monitoring strategies and adaptive management in sustainable tourism and illustrates the complexities, challenges and diverse methods of monitoring a river, that is part of a larger social-ecological system.

Chapter 13 focuses on tourism and community relations in the context of sustainable development by mentioning the complexities of local benefit creation in tourism development and suggests the integration of community resilience as a tool/or a goal in the process of sustainable tourism planning. On similar lines, Chapter 14 again illustrates the issues and challenges of environmental impacts of tourism by exploring research gaps, examples of management innovations and practices and research questions with

respect to a systems-based approach. The concluding chapter highlights the key points underlying all the chapters that include a systems thinking approach to understand the complex relationships among tourism components, the need for a better understanding of visitor experiences and community engagement, the need for research on tourism impacts for building adaptive capacity and resilience and better management of social-ecological systems. Besides briefly outlining some future research themes and implications for policy and practice related to sustainable tourism, it acknowledges that the multiple topics covered in the book are diverse yet overlapping and interconnected.

While the recommendations and models within the chapters are quite well-organised, the broad issues and associated themes in the book could have been structured in a better way. Some theoretical issues seem to have been inadequately addressed in the proposed research agenda such as those related to the ethics of sustainable tourism; corporate sustainability programs, certifications and problems associated with it; the nexus between destination governance and mobilities; tourist psychology and pro-sustainability choice models. Further, while certain issues covered (such as a systems approach) for dealing with complex questions and integration of resilience in sustainable tourism frameworks are not new topics in tourism research, this book offers a great platform to begin with, especially for readers who might be unaware of basic concepts and definitions and are unfamiliar with academic discourse on sustainable tourism. In general, it will be a good resource for students and scholars working in the fields of tourism geography, environmental studies and policy and tourism management and hospitality.