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Change and Innovation

Introduction

By its very definition sustainable tourism is a both a current- and **future**-oriented activity; it's 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"* according to the UNWTO (n.d.). Understanding sustainable tourism and managing therefore has a very strong future-oriented component, which is the focus of this chapter.

Often, when we want to understand the future, one of the first things that we need to do is look to the past to identify the trends that have got us to where we are now, and that, in all likelihood, will continue to be trends into the future. Up until 2020, global tourism had experienced spectacular and sustained growth, in terms of volume, geographic spread, economic benefits, as well as environmental and social impacts. Going back 40 years to the 1970s, tourism has grown from under 70 million international tourist arrivals, to over 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals in 2019, according to UNWTO estimates.

The year 2020 opened with this statement from the UNWTO (2020):

"1.5 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded in 2019, globally. A 4% increase on the previous year which is also forecast for 2020, confirming tourism as a leading and resilient economic sector, especially in view of current uncertainties"

That history was rewritten in 2020, when we all suddenly confronted with stay-at-home orders and international and in some cases, domestic border closures. The shock was intense, and informal discussions with tourism operators suggested that none of their business planning had ever prepared them for something like that. And yet, the concept of future-proofing, whether you use the term resilience, mitigation, adaptation or risk minimisation, or simply planning, has long been part of the tourism lingo, even in the case of black swans, x-factors, wildcards and severe disruptors such as a global pandemic.

This chapter focusses on the future-oriented considerations. We look at what changes are coming, how to understand those changes, ride the wave of change

where it is our interest, and weather the storm of change when it isn't. We cover innovation and structural changes, those tipping point type of changes that once they have occurred are unlike to ever revert back to their original state (unlike temporal change such as seasonality through peak, shoulder and low seasons).

Innovation, in particular, is a buzzword in tourism – we speak of digital disruptions, smart tourism, shared economy/peer-to-peer platforms and so forth. These are all exciting terms, which in many cases can directly impact on sustainable tourism by reducing waste and/or consumption, or creating a more equitable playing field for smaller tourism providers in more remote areas.

It's important not to conflate innovation with progress and progress with improvement. As we'll see in talking about innovation, the very first characteristic that an innovation must possess to be successful is a relative advantage over what already exists. If it doesn't offer a relative advantage, it's important to ask yourself – why do it? Have you fallen into the trap of “pro-innovation bias” – that innovations are inherently superior and should diffuse more rapidly through a system than existing products or services. Our greatest focus should be to bring our resource use back in line with what the planet is offering us. More technology will not necessarily achieve that. In fact, in some cases, re-learning the old ways might be more useful.

In this chapter will consider both the changes, and challenges, that the tourism sector is facing going into the future, we'll discuss what innovation actually is, how we can classify innovations to better understand what they are, and how they either get adopted or rejected. This chapter will also look at an example of an innovation from my own work, to illustrate these concepts in practice and give a personal perspective on what it takes to get a new product or idea from the state of an invention (where it exists only in your head or your lab) to an innovation (where it is available on the market).

Key words and concepts

- Temporal and structural change
- Black swans, wildcards, X factors, disruptors
- Forecasting
- Environmental scanning
- STEEP
- Scenario-based planning
- Delphi analysis
- Business as usual
- Green economy
- Innovation

10.1 Understanding change

Change can come in several forms – seasonality is one well-known example in tourism, and is a form of changing demand patterns, where holiday peak periods are followed by shoulder and low seasons, and these repeat yearly. This type of change can usually be predicted and managed through planning based on prior experience. We know that last year's summer season visitor numbers