10 Sustainable Development and Responsible Tourism

This chapter introduces the global sustainable development agenda and outlines the UN Sustainable Development Goals framework which is made up of 17 goals to be achieved by 2030. This global framework is offered as a lens through which sustainable development in the context of tourism is being implemented and measured. This is contrasted with responsible tourism, which is framed as the set of processes and mechanisms through which sustainable development is being pursued.

The case study of iSimangaliso Wetland Park in South Africa at the end of the chapter consolidates the key ideas from the chapter through highlighting the role that tourism plays in changing and shaping the socio-cultural and environmental fabric of societies, and sustainable approaches to addressing these changes today and in the future.

Introduction

The UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) forecasts that the number of international tourist arrivals will increase from 1.5 billion in 2019 to 1.8 billion in 2030 (UNWTO, 2019; 2020). Given these vast numbers, it becomes important to explore the existential threats to the tourism industry from a sustainable development perspective, and the impact this growth has on natural, socio-cultural and economic environments across the world.

It was Albert Einstein who said that we cannot solve tomorrow's problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. Given the complexity and 'wickedness' of the long list of today's sustainability challenges, which include: climate change, overtourism, land degradation, poverty, global pandemics, child labour and waste, responsible tourism requires a systems approach to tackle this complexity. This approach will be outlined later in this chapter.

The tourism industry is cognisant of these impacts and complexity, and sustainability in the industry is being driven by four forces of social change: dissatisfaction with existing products; growing environmental awareness and cultural sensitivity; realisation by destination regions of the precious resources they possess and their vulnerability; and the changing attitudes of developers and tour operators (Liu, 2003: 460). These drivers, individually and in unison, have created the impetus for the tourism sector to approach and address its stakeholders, including the natural environment, more sustainably.

The chapter begins by outlining the sustainable development agenda in the context of tourism and how responsible tourism practices are contributing and hindering progress on this agenda. Future approaches to dealing with unsustainable tourism are then outlined and conclusions drawn.

Tourism and Sustainable Development

The year 2017 was proclaimed as the United Nations (UN) Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, in recognition of the tourism industry's capacity to contribute to sustainable development through its role in fighting poverty, promoting intercultural dialogue and conserving the environment (UNESCO, 2017). Sustainable development can be defined in numerous ways; however, one of the most enduring definitions is referred to as the 'Brundtland definition': 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987: 41).

The Brundtland Commission was formed in 1983 in response to the significant deterioration of natural and human environments. *The Brundtland Report* (also known as *Our Common Future*) was produced at the culmination of the commission in 1987, and has popularised the definition of sustainable development presented above (WCED, 1987).

Since then, the global framework for international cooperation for sustainable development has been led by the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals are a call for action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity and overall transformative action towards sustainability. Attainment of the goals within the timeframe (by 2030) necessitates urgent, innovative, and far-reaching action from different actors – business, states, civil society, and individual citizens (UN, 2019).

The 17 goals are underpinned by 179 targets, and progress towards these targets will be tracked by 232 indicators (UN, 2019). Tourism can contribute indirectly or directly to all the SDGs, examples of which are presented below, along with the 17 SDGs.

Table 10.1: Examples of indirect and direct tourism contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals

1 NO POVERTY	Tourism can be linked to national poverty reduction strategies and entrepreneurship through low skills requirements and local recruitment.
2 ZERO HUNGER	Tourism can spur sustainable agriculture by promoting production, supplies to hotels, and sales of local products to tourists.
3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	Tax income generated from tourism and visitors fees collected in protected areas can be reinvested in health care and services.
4 QUALITY EDUCATION	Capacity and skills need to be built to ensure the tourism sector can prosper and provide job opportunities for youth, women and those with special needs.
5 GENDER EQUALITY	Tourism can empower women, particularly through the provision of direct jobs and income generation in tourism and hospitality-related enterprises.
6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	Tourism investment requirement for providing utilities can play a critical role in achieving water access and security, hygiene and sanitation.
7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	Tourism can help reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs), mitigate climate change and contribute to energy access by promoting clean energy investments.
8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	Decent work opportunities in tourism, particularly for youth and women, and policies that favour better diversification through tourism value chains can enhance tourism's positive socioeconomic impacts.
9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	Tourism can influence public policies aimed at upgrading and retrofitting infrastructure to make it more sustainable, innovative and efficient.
10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	Sustainable tourism can engage local populations and all stakeholders in tourism development and contribute to urban renewal and rural development.
11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	Tourism can, inter alia, promote urban regeneration, and preserve cultural and natural heritage.
12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	Adopting sustainable consumption and production (SCP) models can help monitor sustainable development impacts for tourism, including for energy, water, waste, biodiversity and job creation.

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