3 Challenges to Implementing Sustainability Practices in Tourism

Introduction

I recently read a line written by Tanja Mihalic, based on the 2005 UNTWO publication *Making Tourism More Sustainable*. She reminds us that the term 'sustainable tourism' is not a kind of tourism but "*is based on the principles of sustainable tourism [theory] to make all tourism more sustainable*". The implication is that any move towards the UNWTO's definition of sustainable tourism as tourism that will "*maintain ecological processes and conserve natural heritage and biodiversity; respect the authenticity, traditional values and cultural heritage of host communities and contribute to cross-cultural understanding; and, ensure viable businesses, and distribute economic benefits to all stakeholders equitably*" (UNEP & UNWTO, 2008) is a move towards sustainability.

There is however a strong sense that we are making very little progress towards greater sustainability in tourism; at first glance, it would appear that tourism has moved little beyond flight carbon offset schemes, high efficiency lightbulbs, and towel re-use initiatives. The cynics would also point to 'greenwashing' within tourism, talking up environmental benefits to give the appearance of greater sustainability than is actually occurring. Why would this be?

The inclusion of sustainability-related behaviours within a business (greenwashing or otherwise) tends to happen for one or several of three reasons.

1. To ward off the imposition of tighter government regulation on tourism activities
2. To tap into this apparently growing market of green consumers, who seek out environmentally and socially sustainable products and services
3. To enhance the social licence of businesses operating in sensitive areas (cruise ships travelling to the highly sensitive Antarctic environment, for example).

Another commonly-cited reason for adding a sustainability strategy to a business' priorities is the so-called business case for sustainability. Briefly, this is the argument that businesses who perform better on social and environmental indicators also perform better financially – a direct link can be made between investing in sustainability and economic returns. Unfortunately this sentiment is often translated into 'investing in sustainability leads to greater profits', which the evidence does not always support. Instead, the argument is much more nuanced, involving risk minimisation, a 'slow' (longer-term) approach to business growth and success, and investing in relationships, as discussed in Chapter 1. In fact, if we adopt the ways to intervene in a system put forward to us by Meadows, we may actually need to reconsider some of the concepts of growth and risk minimising – flipping them on their head, as we shall see in Chapter 11 on regenerative tourism.

To start off this chapter, we are going to plant ourselves firmly within the existing paradigm and examine the business case for sustainability, and asks why, if the business case is so clear, are sustainability practices still so poorly developed in tourism? It reviews challenges that are specific to the travel and tourism sector that make implementation of sustainable tourism even more complex. These include:

- The private/public sector nature of tourism, which brings us neatly to the Tragedy of the Commons archetype listed by Meadows (see Chapter 2).
- The scale-related issues of tourism and integrating practices across tourists to single businesses to destinations, and destinations to host regions and generating regions.
- The issue of inseparability in tourism where production and consumption are linked in ways that do not occur in most sectors.
- The infrequent nature of tourism purchases.
- The 'footloose' nature of much of the sector.
- The influence of business size on sustainability practices.
- The need for local, context-based, yet multi-disciplinary knowledge.

The chapter also raises the tricky question of tourism's relationship with climate change. Tourism and climate change have a two-way relationship, as tourism has a significant carbon footprint and is therefore a major contributor to climate change, and is highly vulnerable to changes in the climate. While the former, tourism's carbon footprint, will be covered in Chapter 5, this chapter will consider how tourism is vulnerable, directly and indirectly, to a changing climate.

Key words and concepts

- Business case for sustainability
- Corporate Social Responsibility
- Slack resources/good management approach
- Tragedy of the commons
- Inseparability of tourism experiences
- Global-local nexus
- Carbon calculators
- Theory of Planned Behaviour
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
- Systems thinking

3.1 The business case for sustainability

'Green is gold' is the key phrase when discussing the business case for sustainability; proving how enterprises do well (Corporate Financial Performance or CFP) by doing good (Corporate Social Responsibility or CSR) has become a form of holy grail in the business literature (Garay & Font, 2012, p.335).

But it turns out that it is not that simple. The research into this area is divided equally between those studies that say CSR activities do have a positive effect on CFP, and those studies that say there is either no effect at best, or at worst, a negative effect. Several explanations are provided for these contradictory findings. First, the relationship is far more complex and nuanced than simple cause and effect; second it depends on what is being measured; and third, it depends on the measures being used.

At the very least, one aspect of the relationship that researchers do appear to agree on is that it is bi-directional; a good CSR performance is as much likely to influence as be influenced by good CFP. This complex, bi-direction relationship between CSR and CFP is often explained by two alternative approaches: the 'slack resources' approach and the 'good management' approach.

The slack resources approach recognises that a company with strong CFP will generate extra resources that can be invested in CSR. In this case 'doing well' actually paves the way for 'doing good' by providing the slack or additional resources needed to invest in CSR initiatives (Singal, 2014).

The good management approach is that CSR forms part of a suite of best practice activities designed to actively engage internal and external stakeholders, provide clear channels of communication, transparency and accountability, and so forth. CFP may improve through CSR implementation by developing capabilities such as closer internal and communication and interaction, a clearer articulation of the owner's vision, greater management flexibility and improved external relationships (Garay & Font, 2012).

It could be argued that CSR and CFP are actually part of a 'virtuous cycle' (Singal, 2014). A study of the Nanshan Cultural Tourism Zone in Hainan, China, found that their improved environmental performance, and the social recognition and positive press that came with it, caught the attention of the local govern-