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Operationalising Sustainable Tourism

Introduction

As well as simply (!) learning to keep the three sustainability balls in the air, it's important to know how to juggle these balls in a coherent and pleasing manner – after all tourism is part of the experience economy and we want to deliver something that is engaging and attractive to its end users, tourists.

This chapter therefore discusses how to operationalise sustainability in tourism. Some have tried to do this at the level of a destination, creating the 'Green Destinations' brand (Figure 8.1). It's a laudable effort and one which hopefully will lead to greater sustainability for the sector as a whole in the long run. Given what we know about the complexity of the tourism system, creating a green destination is, however, perhaps outside the scope of this book, and of most of us as practitioners or tourism business managers.



Figure 8.1: Green Destinations. <http://greendestinations.org/>

Instead, we will aim for a more achievable target – in the words of Norman Peale (author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*):

Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.

This chapter will combine what we have learned to date in Chapters 1-7 and integrate them, using a case study approach of a tourism business that strives

to make sustainability a core part of its ethics, business practice and tourism experience. We'll review how it engages with other stakeholders and other partners, how it strives to maximise its positive impacts and minimise its negative ones, as well as its use of indicators and the outcomes of its efforts.

We'll also introduce some new concepts in this chapter. First, we'll review some important considerations of sustainability in tourism, not least of which are tourism as an experiential economy and the characteristics of the 'green market', then we'll look the importance of business models that support sustainability as part of a value creation approach. We'll look at the concept of co-creation and smart systems that support sustainability. The latter will serve as our segue into Chapter 9 on innovation, our final 'content' chapter.

Key words and concepts

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| ■ Experience and transformation economy | ■ Value creation |
| ■ Service Dominant Logic | ■ Circular economy |
| ■ Green market | ■ Co-creation |
| ■ Business models | ■ Demarketing |

8.1 The experience economy – integrating sustainability into the tourist experience

The previous chapters have provided a fair amount of knowledge about what should be done to make tourism more sustainable. The World Travel and Tourism Council (2002) reminds us of the 10 priority areas for sustainable tourism as:

- 1 Waste minimisation, reuse and recycling.
- 2 Energy efficiency, conservation and management
- 3 Management of freshwater resources
- 4 Transport
- 5 Involving staff, customers and communities in environmental issues
- 6 Design for sustainability
- 7 Partnerships for sustainability.
- 8 Wastewater treatment
- 9 Land use planning and management
- 10 Hazardous substances

Of those ten, the first five explicitly require the participation of tourists themselves: tourists need to play an active role in creating a sustainable tourism experience. This leads us directly to the issues of understanding the characteristics of the experience economy and the process of co-creation, and to introduce the concept of Service Dominant Logic.

Tourism has long been positioned a key part of the experience economy; a progression from the agrarian economy (farming, etc.), the industrial economy (manufacturing, etc.), and the service economy (education, IT services, etc.), to the experience economy (entertainment, etc.), where memories themselves become the sales 'product' (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The next stage, known as the 'transformation economy', may arguably be more relevant to sustainability than the experience economy, and will also be discussed here.

In the experience economy (our current position), customers pay to enjoy a series of memorable events that engage them in a personal way and create feelings of pleasure and arousal. It's not hard to see the relevance for leisure travel, and this sets the tone for how to design tourism for successful sustainability outcomes. It reminds us not to neglect consumer expectations and desires as a key factor in designing successful sustainable tourism experiences. We'll cover this by considering who 'green tourists' are and what they are looking for in their tourism experience, as part of understanding the co-created experience.

Pine and Gilmore (1999, p.206) argue that "experiences are not the utmost in economic offerings", but that the next stage is the 'transformation economy'. Here, success lies in understanding the aspirations of individual consumers, designing an experience that guides them to fully realise those aspirations and transform them. To achieve this, the experience stager must create a bond with the buyer, who must be engaged in personal purposes. As part of this relationship, the 'transformation elicitor' stages a series of experiences to help the buyer persevere towards a common goal. This is the approach adopted by the business owner in the case study that we will be using in this chapter, and we'll unpack how and why it is a useful approach in this context.

Adopting this approach requires a good understanding of how tourists might engage with a sustainability-focussed experience. We'll divide this into three parts; (i) what do we know about green tourists, (ii) why co-creation is so important in tourism experiences and (iii) how the concept of Service Dominant Logic is important to furthering sustainable tourism experiences.

First, let's recap what we know about green tourists (c.f. Chapter 6). Studies consistently show that up to 75% of us care about the environment in some way, but that the majority don't necessarily know how to engage with sustainability in a consumption setting. The proportion of us willing to put our money where our mouth is in buying green products and services is still comparatively small.

Instead, some authors talk about an *emerging* green tourism market, as yet unaware of the benefits of green travel products and services and unfamiliar with the environmental language, but who may be sensitised to green tourism under the correct circumstances (Bergin-Seers & Mair, 2009). An emerging market approach shifts the focus from niche markets such as ecotourism towards mainstream markets.