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Introduction

Sustainability is often represented as resting on the three founding pillars of social, environmental and economic sustainability (people, planet and profit) – a firm, immovable foundation, upon which all else rests. Build these correctly at the start and the rest will follow, freeing you up to focus on the day to day running of operations.

For this book, however, I invite you to think of sustainability as three juggling balls – representing people, planet and profit. Your job is to keep those three balls moving through the air, always dynamic, never resting. Take your eye off one of the balls, and it is sure to fall to the ground, in all likelihood taking at least one other ball with it.



To keep all three balls moving gracefully through the air, you are going to need several things – not least hand to eye coordination! You will need focus – “what am I trying to achieve?”

You will need skill – “what resources, knowledge and experience do I have at my disposal?”

And you will need to practice.

Because, ultimately, sustainability comes down to a set of decisions – decisions that you will have to make repeatedly for as long as you are involved in sustainable tourism.

The first aim of this book is to help you focus, decide what you want to achieve in terms of sustainability. And maybe to start with, you will only be able to keep two of those balls in the air, perhaps even only one. The second aim of this book is to highlight the types of resources and knowledge that you’ll need to keep those balls in the air. This may include environmental impact assessments and indicators, an awareness of policy and regulations, or techniques to successfully engage with community. Finally, the third aim of this book is demonstrate how you practice these things. We’ll do this by looking at actual businesses and how they manage to keep two or three balls in the air at any one time.

The structure of this book is geared towards understanding how an individual makes decisions that move towards or away from sustainability practices within a given set of influencers. These will be the focus of Sections 2: Managing for Sustainability and 3: The Future of Sustainable Tourism.

First, however, we must understand what sustainability means in a tourism context, why it has proven so difficult to implement, and what both positive and negative outcomes of sustainable tourism might look like. Combined with the chapter on ethics, this will give you a lens through which to view the implementation of sustainability.

Key words and concepts

- Sustainability
- Three pillars of people, place and profit
- Sustainable tourism
- Brundtland report
- Sequence of tourism platforms
- UNEP and UNWTO
- Sustainable Development Goals
- One Planet Programme
- Tourism master plans
- Ecotourism

1.1 The concept of sustainability

To begin, let's consider how we should think about the broader concept of sustainability.

Sustainability, when stripped right back to its bare bones, is about relationships. Relationships to people (social sustainability), planet (environmental sustainability) and profit (economic sustainability).

But what does that mean? It's your relationships with your employees, your customers, your dependents and family. It's your suppliers, local producers, the community who share the same space and resources as you. It's the people who set the rules for what you can and can't do. It's also the people who look to you for leadership, as a role model to set the best example of what might be. It's how you treat those close to you, as well as those who may seem different for their gender, age, education, religion, race, and ability.

It's also the environment in which you live. The landscape, both biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living). It's how you change the habitat around you, by using rocks and wood as construction material, clearing the landscape to build tourism infrastructure, using water for cleaning and production, lighting up spaces that were previously dark. It's how you dispose of your waste material, on land, in water and in the air. It's the other creatures that share your space – those that may need the same resources as you. It's both direct and indirect, through your suppliers, as well as the practices that you encourage or discourage at your site.

Finally, it's your wallet, your banker, your shareholders, your dependents, your supply chain, your employees. It's also your financial security, your level of comfort, your ability to take care of the unexpected, to cope with a rainy day. It's your dreams... of what might be and how to get there.

Ultimately these are all facets of the same thing: your ability to function well, both now and in the future. And in the next section, we will get to the

official definitions of sustainability and how they align with this fuzzier concept of sustainability. Intermingled with this, it's your sense of your place within a complex web of other beings, some of whom will have competing needs, as well as rules and policies that govern you, hampering or facilitating your sustainability goals. It's your sense of responsibility and your sense of agency – of having an effect (positive or negative) on the world around you.

Question

In your current role, name and describe three relationships which have a sustainability-related link. How do you think about these in the long-term? What do you do to maintain these relationships?

Now think back to your juggle act. See the size of the task ahead? Make no mistake, it's no simple ask to bring about greater sustainability in tourism. Along the way, we'll meet some people who will share their journeys of learning how to juggle all three balls at once – they will tell us how it is at once exhausting and rewarding. And always challenging.

1.2 Sustainable development

Our engagement with the concept of sustainability in the West, arose more or less straight out of one woman's relationship with the environment around her. Her name was Rachel Carson and she was an environmental scientist, public servant and avid writer born in 1907 in rural USA. Her best known book *Silent Spring* published in 1962 is often said to have spearheaded the Western environmental movement that we recognise today.

The book's primary concern was the impact of pesticides on human health, while observing the direct impacts it was having on rural ecosystems. The title *Silent Spring* warned of a day when we would no longer hear birdsong come springtime. Her book caused much controversy, but highlights valuing our relationship with ourselves (the health concerns that she raised) as well as with the natural environment. In this vein she is noted to have said: "The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery – not over nature but of ourselves."

A suite of environmental regulations, governmental agencies, environmental defence organisations, environmental studies and popular science books followed the publication of *Silent Spring*. But it was two decades later that sustainability was formally linked to the concept of development and defined in the 1987 Brundtland report, *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission of Environment and Development*, commissioned by the United Nations and which laid out the fundamental principles of sustainability and sustainable development.