

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
**SUSTAINABLE**  
**TOURISM**

SECOND EDITION



ALEXANDRA COGHLAN

(G)

Curious why we chose a dragonfly for the cover?

The choice of a dragonfly for the cover was a considered one. First they are beautiful. But more importantly, dragonflies are considered a symbol of transformation and self-realisation, both key to transitioning to a sustainable future. They are also indicators of ecological health in many environments, also important for sustainability. Finally, their ability to fly is quite extraordinary - watch one next time you see one! They can orient their wings independently of each other, making them more agile than any other aerial species. It also makes them the world best hunters! So much extraordinary in such a small, ordinary species... enjoy =)

# **Introduction to Sustainable Tourism**

**2nd Edition**

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## Preface

Prior to the start of 2020, tourism was arguably one of the world's largest employers and export business, ranging from globally recognisable multinational corporations through to informal, ad-hoc 'experiences' listed on shared economy platforms such as Airbnb.

And then Covid happened, and the global travel and exchange system that we had built around the sector came to a grinding, painful standstill. With lockdowns in place, international and even some state/local borders closed, quarantine periods implemented, and a state of flux and uncertainty (and fear) around changing travel requirements that impacted travel decisions even where travel was possible, tourism was arguable one of the hardest hit sectors.

I will always remember having coffee with a tourism business owner and discussing a research project and whether it would qualify for R&D (research and development) tax breaks, only to watch my industry partner shake his head and tell me "my friend, we won't be paying any taxes for a long, long, long time the state our business is in". The realisation of the grit and mental fortitude of my long-term research partners, the sense of responsibility towards employees and the weight of the responsibility in the face of so much uncertainty, was really brought home to me during that coffee meeting.

The pandemic crisis, covered in the first edition of this book as a potential Black Swan event or a disruptor, put a spotlight on the system of tourism – its complexity, its vulnerabilities and to some extent, its resilience. These have been captured in the ideas of "Build Back Better" or as some have preferred "Build Forward Better". It's raised questions about whether we want to return to pre-Covid "normal" or whether we want to question what is normal, and whether it is time for a change.

The first edition described sustainability in terms of avoiding "too lateness" – when we say "go to that destination and see it before it's too late", what do we mean by too late? How can we recognise, plan for and avoid "too lateness". In essence, "too late" is a form of intergenerational inequity, as what we are actually saying is "you should have seen it 10, 20, 50 years ago! It was so much better then". Second, we also want to promote intragenerational equity, following the 2022 UN resolution for a new Human Right, that of the right to live in a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, including clean air to breathe, safe water to drink, sustainably produced food to eat, non-toxic environments, a safe climate, and healthy biodiversity and ecosystems.

This book will explore what these ideas look like in tourism context, and why sustainability has been very challenging to put into mainstream practice in the sector. Who is even in the sector? We may be fairly confident that the travel agent who booked your trip, the airline and hotel that you use are part of the tourism sector. But

what about the taxi that got you from the airport to the hotel, or the train that took you from your home to the airport for that matter? What about the restaurants you will eat in, the supermarkets you'll use to buy the toothpaste you forgot to bring? The banks where you'll withdraw cash, and the police who will keep you safe in a destination? And each of these services has its own supply chain to think about – leading to a series of Russian dolls, each one hiding another inside.

This interlinking of supply chains and diverse sectors and regions begs the question: does the whole complex system need to be sustainable – from tourism generating region to host destination, and all the carbon emitting transportation along the way – for tourism itself to be sustainable? The purists would argue “yes”. The pragmatists might convince us otherwise, pointing out the value of trade-offs, and the need to start somewhere.

Second, tourism inevitably has impacts: the act of observation always changes the observed. The trick is to minimise the negative impacts and maximise the positive impacts. Sustainability is a process, like it or not, and it is incremental and adaptive. Tourism in particular, not only influences its environment, but is highly influenced by its environment (think rainy days, a pilot strike, a spike in the value of local currency, a nearby earthquake, or a terrorist attack). Cause and effect is not always immediately apparent and linear relationships do not always exist, making managing this diffuse sector even more challenging. Finally, sustainable tourism means different things to different people.

Unpacking sustainable tourism therefore requires a good understanding of what it means, why it's proving difficult to implement and what its positive and negative impacts actually are. We need to understand the policy framework that binds sustainable tourism practices, as well as the diversity of individual choices that practitioners make within that framework, how they operationalise those choices and work with partners to implement sustainability. We'll review some cases where these have been most effectively carried out and how we know that they are being effective. Finally we'll look at the future of sustainable tourism: how innovations are influencing sustainable practices and what the future trends are that need to be addressed.

The learning sequence will be as follows:

## **Part 1: Introduction**

### **1: Setting the scene of sustainable tourism**

This chapter sets out the need for sustainability and the global framework for sustainability and how it relates to tourism. It looks at the various agreements and goals that exist as a framework for considering sustainability goals within tourism, and reviews the triple bottom line approach to sustainability. It also touches on Covid has affected tourism and how we think about sustainability.

### **2: Tourism systems**

This chapter presents a systems approach to tourism and how that must underpin all discussions of sustainability. It focusses on 'loopy' thinking, understanding causal loops and flows, and draws on Meadows' ideas of how we might intervene to



influence a system, presenting some (but not all) assumptions that must be challenged to seriously engage with sustainability.

### **3: Challenges to implementing sustainability in tourism**

This chapter builds on the systems approach to sustainability. It examines the idea of a business case for sustainability, and asks why, if the business case is so clear, is it still so poorly developed in tourism? It also raises the question of tourism's carbon footprint, system-based incentives and disincentives for applying sustainability in practice.

### **4: Ethics and values**

This chapter explores how ethics and values bring to bear on integrating sustainability into business practice. It explores why the discussion of sustainability itself is problematic, and why any operationalisation of the principles must start with an understanding of how values play into the operationalisation of sustainability.

### **5: Impacts of tourism**

This chapter reviews the types of impacts, positive and negative associated with tourism, and introduces the types of case studies that will bring the material to life throughout the remaining book chapters.

## **Part 2: Managing for sustainability**

### **6: Sustainable tourism policy frameworks**

This chapter reviews the policy frameworks in which operators function, and how these affect consumer behaviour in tourism. It explains the importance of different policy structures to achieve the types of positive impacts outlined in Chapter 5 and contrasts progressive and less progressive approaches

### **7: Governance and partnerships**

Based on Chapter 6, this chapter explores how partnerships can best be leveraged to integrate sustainability. This includes community groups, NGOs, certification agencies, etc.

### **8: Measures and tools**

This chapter explores the different types of tools available to practitioners to measure, track and develop their pathway towards sustainability. It focuses specifically on a hierarchy of tools that can be combined or used separately to influence tourist behaviour, outlining some of the theories that can be used to design behavioural interventions and how these play into green marketing.

### **9: Operationalising sustainable tourism**

This chapter presents business practices that have adopted a sustainability value and ethic, and looks at how sustainability is operationalised into business practice. It uses actual cases, and draws out lessons from those cases around the influence of policy, supply chains, and trade-offs to maximise benefits and minimise negative impacts. It brings into sharp relief the importance of staff and managerial decisions in the operationalisation of sustainability.

## **Part 3: Future of sustainable tourism**

### **10: Change and innovation**

This chapter looks at some of the big issues that tourism will be facing in the next 20-50 years and asks how well we are prepared for these changes. Existing research suggests that tourism does not engage very well with the larger issues of geopolitical stability, a transition away from the carbon economy, etc. This chapter also reviews the types of innovation that are assisting the transition to sustainability as well as well as providing a framework for understanding innovation and its role in tourism as part of the service industry.

### **11: Regenerative tourism**

This chapter explores whether sustainability is still the most appropriate concept 40 years after its conception and at a time when half of our planetary boundaries have been exceeded. Is it time to stop thinking how we can extract with minimal harm, and instead reverse our processes so that we are now putting back more than we take through regenerative processes?

### **12: Concluding remarks**

This chapter integrates the material presented in previous chapters and asks readers to think about how the systems-based, supply chain approach can be applied to respond to the bigger future challenges to sustainability in tourism

The textbook and its exercises along with supplementary material are designed to help you as a student or a practitioner appreciate the complexity of implementing sustainable tourism, but at the same time to help you focus on what you want to achieve in terms of sustainability.

It provides you with a range of resources and knowledge that you'll need to implement sustainability, including examples environmental impact assessments and indicators, an awareness of policy and regulations, and techniques to successfully engage with community. And it will hopefully inspire you by looking at a number of actual businesses who practice sustainability, and who give an honest account of challenges and rewards of doing so.

## **Hyperlinks and QR codes**

*Introduction to Sustainable Tourism* offers readers additional resources to better understand the material presented in the textbook. The hyperlinks in the text lead to web-pages, podcasts and videos, and they are accompanied by QR codes so that readers can easily access these resources on their smartphones and tablets while reading this print version of the book.