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EDITORIAL

Getting from here to there: systems change, behavioural change and sustainable tourism

Progress towards sustainable tourism is at best almost static, and some commentators even believe that we are moving backwards. According to Buckley (2012, p. 534), “it is clear that mainstream tourism, like other industry sectors and the human economy as a whole, is far from sustainable”. Gössling, Hall, Ekström, Engeset, and Aall (2012, p. 899) also assert that “there is considerable evidence that tourism is becoming less sustainable, primarily as a result of the sector’s rapid growth and limited progress towards implementing more environmentally friendly operations on a global scale”. It seems that the steps that have been taken so far provide a beginning, but that they are not remotely enough. Indeed, from reading recent reviews of the field one might conclude that tackling sustainable tourism issues in a fundamental manner would threaten the vested interests and our mainstream beliefs and values too directly (Budeanu, 2007; Gössling, Hall, & Weaver, 2009; Weaver, 2012). The obstacles to progress seem intractable, yet numerous observers believe we must tackle them eventually. That also means that we need to research how to overcome those obstacles.

Sustainable tourism researchers, however, are only just beginning to consider what major changes and initiatives are required to ensure that tourism is fundamentally more sustainable. By contrast, some social science researchers have already considered much more fully the ways in which society needs to make wholesale changes in response to climate change. This editorial considers some of the arguments from this climate change literature that indicates what might be required to achieve more radical progress towards sustainable tourism. What might this wider literature suggest about getting from here to there for sustainable tourism?

System and behavioural constraints

Tourism businesses often have few reasons to want to promote sustainable tourism. They usually have a vested interest in “business as usual” as they have made previous investments in tourism infrastructure, such as airports, airplanes, accommodation and attractions, as well as in business operations and practices, that are based on existing modes of activity and operation that are often inimical to sustainability. Above all, tourism businesses are likely to alter their behaviour only if it results in clear competitive advantages and improved profits. But in this context Weaver (2012, p. 31) notes that “the veneer sustainability of the corporate world – and government – is simply a reflection of and response to the veneer environmentalism of society more generally”. He suggests that the lack of corporate interest in, for instance, expensive sustainability certification schemes is because currently they “have almost no resonance among tourists, and thus provide certified products with no significant competitive advantage over their non-certified competitors”. Similarly, Budeanu

(2007, p. 502) suggests that “positive attitudes of tourists towards environmentally benign holiday products and services are not reflected in their actions” (Weaver, 2009). For such reasons, Mowforth and Munt (2009, p. 376) conclude that “The industry is unlikely to change its modus operandi . . . the growth in ‘corporate consciousness’ and corporate social responsibility is unlikely to have more than a minimal impact”.

More widely, the contemporary world is characterised by a pervasive consumerism where people express and form their identities in part through purchasing consumer goods and services (Urry, 2011, p. 55). In this context people have become habituated to social practices, including holidays and long distance travel, which are resource-intensive and involve high greenhouse gas emissions. A further constraint on sustainable tourism is that, while governments have been keen to promote tourism for jobs and economic growth, by contrast they “have been shy to encourage or require change in the tourism sector beyond basic safety regulations” (Lane, 2009, p. 24). The prevalence of neo-liberalism and of privatisation also means that regulation is often unwelcome, especially when it is directed and led by the state.

The systems and behaviours connected with tourism clearly possess a powerful “conservative momentum” or “path dependency” (Urry, 2011, p. 51; Bramwell & Cox, 2009) which hampers significant progress towards sustainability. People tend to be creatures of social routine and habit and their social practices are organised into systems. For much of the time their behaviours are locked into and reproduce the social practices and institutions that are the basis of social systems. Consequently, moving to radically more sustainable tourism will be very difficult as it is likely to involve reversing well-established and interlocking systems and social practices, countering powerful vested interests and fundamentally re-setting policy agendas. It probably will rely on profound changes occurring in the wider environment and across society.

But there are significant “path creating” transformations in society, and just occasionally in history they have been very profound, such as the relatively recent rise of telecommunications networks and the Internet. There can be unexpected and rare events, which may be quite small in themselves, that have huge impacts on physical and social systems. Such change is often not a smooth linear process; it may involve non-linear tipping points from one path to another, so that change may be abrupt and not gradual (Urry, 2011, p. 125).

Fundamental changes required in response to threats

A number of social science researchers have explored the ways in which society might make fundamental changes in response to climate change threats. While their ideas relate to wider debates, they are considered here as they may indicate ways to achieve more fundamental progress towards sustainable tourism. This is important as we need to recognise, understand and critically assess the obstacles, influences, possibilities and potential strategies for differing degrees of change relevant to tourism and sustainable development, both slow and incremental and more wholesale. Many assert that we ought not to wait for major crises before we act. Instead, we should take more charge of our own future.

In his book *The politics of climate change* (2009) Anthony Giddens contends that “for better or worse, the state retains many of the powers that have to be invoked if a serious impact on global warming is to be made”, so that to more fully address climate change “the chances of success will depend a great deal upon *government and the state*” (p. 91, emphasis in the original). He calls for future action from what he terms the “ensuring state”, where the state acts as a facilitator to stimulate and support the many groups in society that

must drive forward the required policies, and where it also ensures that definite outcomes are achieved. The state has to take an ensuring role in the sense of being “responsible for monitoring public goals and for trying to make sure they are realised in a visible and acceptable fashion” (p. 69). Giddens identifies a wide range of tasks for the “ensuring state”, including: helping us all to think ahead, keeping climate change at the top of the political agenda, encouraging and cooperating with businesses and consumers to encourage them to alter their behaviour, managing climate change risks in the context of other risks, acting to counter business interests which seek to block climate change initiatives, developing an appropriate economic and fiscal framework for moving towards a low-carbon economy, and integrating climate change policies at local, regional, national and international scales.

A second text to take into account is John Urry’s *Climate change and society* (2011). His analysis considers how alternative low carbon systems might be socially engendered and sustained in a more fully committed response to climate change. In this he focuses less on the state and more on how changes may occur in the embedded and relatively unchanging values and practices in wider society. He stresses that the habits of society are the stuff of social life and that they are not easily changeable, and certainly not by states seeking simply to instruct people to change their behaviour. Urry emphasises the need to shift the broad societal systems that form and presuppose people’s habits. He contends that social systems will need to be changed through the encouragement of “positive alternatives to high carbon lives, alternatives that become a matter of fashion and desire” (p. 122). The necessary alternative lifestyles have to offer “a system that is fashionable and faddish, that wins hearts and minds, that is better and more fun” (p. 132). He also indicates there is a need for “resource capitalism”, whereby nature is no longer considered as separate from the economy, so that it is unavailable for transformation through short-term profit maximisation. This approach would also require an “ensuring state”, with regulation of markets seen as necessary, although the state’s role is given less prominence by Urry than it is by Giddens.

The most recent book considered here is Stephen Wheeler’s (2012) *Climate change and social ecology. A new perspective on the climate challenge*. Wheeler believes that, to respond more fundamentally to climate change threats and to create much more sustainable development, there is a need to improve what he calls our “social ecology”, which involves our values, mind-sets, and social organisations. Steps to do this would include institutional reforms to improve democracy and also measures to prevent corporations and the wealthy from shaping societies in other directions. He stresses the necessity “to improve our ability to think ecologically about the world. By this I mean thinking systemically, contextually, and holistically about the various contexts in which we live, including understanding how various dynamics have led to the current sustainability crisis and how more sustainable social systems might come about” (p. 123). For Wheeler, changing social systems will mean focusing on the major forces that shape them, and in this there is a key role for educational strategies to encourage public understanding of complex issues. Ultimately, changes in mindsets and values are depicted as highly important.

Finally, in this editorial we can report an improving position for the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, and an improving position which strengthens the potential influence that researchers could have by publishing their work in this journal. The Journal’s Impact Factor in the two-year Thomson Reuters Social Sciences Citation Index rose from 1.539 in 2011 to 1.929 in 2012, placing the Journal 3rd among the tourism journals and also 4th out of the 36 journals in the Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism category. The number of on-line downloads since June 2011 for each published paper is now shown on the journal’s website, and this indicates a very healthy level of use of the journal. Researchers should also note

that the continuing growth in new paper submissions, citations and downloads has meant that the allocation of journal pages for this year has been increased to 1280.

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