

Seeking leadership for a sustainable future

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1. Introduction

As a researcher, I have been involved in many a draft of recommendations, action plans and strategies. I have worked on projects and assisted in setting achievable steps and choosing indicators for monitoring while walking along the tightrope between expectations of high-level international institutions and achievable goals for local stakeholders. While this work has produced sustainable local tourism strategies and products, a feeling remains, that these projects have not taken sustainability far enough. When the books are closed and the project complete, who is checking in on the status of these strategies and what happens when goals aren't met. Who cares? Are there consequences? While I contemplate my own role in creating a sustainable future, I find myself asking the question: *Who leads sustainable tourism development?* And it is this question, I dedicate this essay to.

2. The Planning Perspective

I pose this question from a tourism planning perspective. Seeing planning as making decisions that influence the future of tourism, development of strategies, following policies, implementation and monitoring. Tourism planning links together the various parts of the tourism system and can coordinate. In tourism planning as a discipline, sustainability has positioned itself as an overarching goal and there is a plethora of indicators to measure sustainability. However, the most commonly used indicators remain predominantly economic, followed by socio-cultural and then ecological. Studies continue to show this to be the case (del Río-Vázquez et al., 2019).

We are not in a time of lacking ideas. Plenty of well-funded international projects have been completed. I can name INSIGHTS, as a project I was involved in myself as an example (Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, 2019). A quick google search will lead to many examples of sustainable options worldwide. And even during the pandemic, the UNWTO have started campaigns to restart tourism in a more innovative and sustainable manner (UNWTO, 2020).

Ideas, strategies, policies and action plans for sustainable tourism exist. Following the basic steps of tourism planning, from collecting data all the way through to monitoring and evaluation we have reached the final steps: monitoring approaches which include evaluation and feedback loops. Certification systems and indicator systems exist in abundance (e.g. International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories/INSTO (UNWTO, 2021), European Tourism Indicator System /ETIS (European Commission, n.d.)) yet widespread use of a consolidated system is lacking (Alfaro Navarro et al., 2020). The industry has clearly decided on ways to measure sustainability, which in theory should assist regions in becoming more active in monitoring their development progresses. The distribution of these systems remains limited, (considering INSTO for example, which was established in 2004 and currently has 30 participating observatories). The full potential such international organizations could have in regards to assisting in monitoring is yet to be reached.

There has been a growing call for a shift in paradigm, making clear that community and stakeholder approaches need to take center stage in a sustainable tourism future (Dwyer, 2018; Wanner & Pröbstl-

Haider, 2019). Connecting with above mentioned planning perspective, there is a clear call of stakeholder participation with a stewardship function in planning approaches.

Furthermore, as a discipline tourism planning believes that sustainability is achievable in tourism. Ecological, socio-cultural and economic sustainability are positioned throughout the multi-level planning and policy structure in which tourism is developed. Planning also sees indicators as a method to measure sustainability. Choosing relevant indicators, collecting data and observing developments will thus determine when sustainability in tourism has been achieved. However, there is also a recognition, that tourism is very dynamic and standards will change over time.

The goal is to make “sustainable tourism” not a type of tourism but the underlying way in which tourism is planned and developed. Thus, asking who leads sustainable tourism development from a planning perspective must investigate who influences and sets standards, monitors them and decides when sustainability has been achieved. Only when the question has been answered, can we proceed to ensure long-term sustainability in a sector as large and diverse as tourism.

3. Planning a more sustainable tourism future

Assuming that sustainability is achievable, and recognizing shortcoming in current tourism developments to achieve sustainability, strategies and policies must be taken a step further. Monitoring and evaluation may be an important aspect of this, but only if there are consequences of not complying with strategies. Generally, one might argue that if a region does not follow its strategy, they only harm themselves, but this neglects how vital it is to have a global approach towards sustainability. Drastic options might include revoking financial means or exclusion from networks. But these forms of punishment would exclude them from development instead of assist them.

I suggest building stronger support networks specifically for monitoring sustainability developments in tourism. While reporting for projects seems to lead to greenwashing outcomes and giving people what they want to hear, the suggested network should be a non-binding honest network in which there is room for failure and assistance. Networks such as INSTO (UNWTO, 2021) or displaying of European Destinations of Excellence (European Commission, 2018) continue to highlight regions which are already involved in monitoring. The entrance ticket is the ability to fulfill the criteria, which is a threshold many regions struggle with.

As certain networks already exist, this means that tourism does not have to start from scratch. Moreover, I suggest a stronger utilization of the existing structures with improved support, be it financial or via expertise, to assist local stakeholders to establish long-term monitoring practices. Binding them into a network increases accountability. Knowledge exchange and discussing problems leads to open dialogue on current issues in tourism practices. By encouraging regions to care, and teaching how to use resources efficiently in effective monitoring, one empowers regions to have the ability not only to collect data, but interpret and act on it. Thus planning, as a discipline can lead regions to sustained sustainable development.

To ensure this, having sets of usable and standardized sustainability indicators is a requirement. Current indicators systems such as those for the SDGs and ETIS should be consolidated and jointly taught and distributed in networks. There are too many options with too little focus. The more standardized the indicators, the more comparable sustainability across the globe and the tourism system. Having a clear and well communicated set of indicators, allows stakeholders to improve focused data collection. It will also give a standardized foundation on which knowledge exchange and solution finding can be based.

Naturally, regional specificities may require different approaches. There is no cookie cutter to sustainable tourism. So while a strong joint foundation of indicators provides a basis for network support

and accountability, there must also be space for individuality. Considering tourism trends seeing visitors seeking high quality yet individual experiences, there must be place for tourism niches to prevail and unique factors to be utilized. With the existing lists of tourism indicators, there is no doubt that additional indicators to reflect the sustainability goals of say a rural hiking region or a spa destination could be incorporated just as well as those of a sun and sea destination. However, a focus of indicators would allow for greater mutual support and a clear focus for the upcoming years of development.

In my research I have witnessed that as a result of the pandemic, the importance of tracking economic indicators has risen. This is not entirely unjustified considering the livelihoods, employment and income generation at risk, when tourism is effectively shut down. However, I see this as a time to draw additional attention to environmental and social sustainability indicators if we are truly seeking to re-open/re-build tourism back better. Changing attitudes is never easy and the past year and a half have shown that we hold on very dearly to what we knew. It is in times like these, that leaders are needed to drive development and take planning and policy to new plateaus, to truly emerge stronger and more resilient.

There is no single leader in tourism development. Both top-down and bottom-up planning have leadership roles to claim. Organizations at international and national level will determine policy and set standards. They can demand reporting and monitoring to set indicators. However, sustainable development is truly implemented at local levels. As communities and their stakeholders are ultimately those responsible for effective tourism development. Nonetheless, being able to combine the organizational benefits of higher levels with the implementation abilities of lower levels through joint accepted indicators and monitoring, will ultimately lead to an improved sustainable future.

So instead of considering *who* is the leader behind tourism, I would argue that it is more important to consider *what* is leading tourism; and currently the *what* in tourism is sustainability. Therefore, I call to position tourism planning, as a discipline, as a leader in the tourism system. If we lead through well founded planning approaches, the need for a leader is no longer relevant. Similar to the tourism system being multifaceted and complex, so the leadership of its development will also not be a single, easy answer.

I find the questions remaining are no longer focused on leadership, but center around which indicators and monitoring processes will be effective and how social and environmental indicators can be given the position they deserve in the midst of a pandemic. How can the choice of effective indicators empower local stakeholders to create and maintain a sustainable tourism system that is right for them? And finally: How can my peers and I integrate and position ourselves in tourism planning to become the leaders the future is calling?

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