

# Communicating Sustainability-Led Innovation in Tourism: Challenges and Potentials

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This paper deals with the challenges and potentials of building knowledge of sustainability-led innovation in tourism. Sustainability-led innovation is becoming essential to many sectors, including tourism. It is defined as the creation of new markets, products, services or processes driven by social, ethical and environmental issues. The tourism sector holds considerable amounts of knowledge about the ecological and social impacts of tourism, yet this knowledge is rarely communicated more broadly to society, or with the aim of designing not only sustainable tourism but also a sustainable society. In order for sustainability ideas and practices to transform tourist behaviour and the tourism sector as a whole, a deeper and broader communication movement is proposed in this study. A cross-sector literature review is used to elicit the main challenges posed by sustainability-led innovation for tourism, and to propose effective forms of communication about sustainable innovation in tourism. Forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication are discussed, through which participants may directly experience familiar themes of sustainability in tourism.

*Keywords:* Sustainability-led innovation; tourism; CSR Communication

## Introduction

Over the previous decade, the tourism sector has been undergoing significant changes and facing new challenges that call for new perspectives (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003; Moscardo, 2008; Muqbil, 2008; Pleumarom, 2009; Tribe, 2009; Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011; Križaj & Zakonjšek, 2011). Although, tourism is one of the ‘world’s biggest money spinner[s]’ (Pleumarom, 2009), it has also become a ‘runaway phenomenon, ill-managed and barely controlled’ (Tribe, 2009, p. 3) ‘The travel and tourism industry is caught in an unprecedented cycle of boom and bust. It is being affected by too much happening too quickly in too many different sectors and parts of the world. The need for new ideas, from new people for a new era has never been more important’ (Muqbil, 2008). Authors clearly argue for more rational development

in the tourism industry and call for input from *new voices*.

In sustainability studies in different sectors, scholars are eagerly seeking new conceptualisations and models that integrate the earth system, human development and sustainability (Fletcher & Grose, 2011; Bell & Morse, 2008; Guy & Moore, 2005; Clark & Dickson, 2003). Sustainability-led innovation is becoming a critical dimension of strategies for achieving sustainable consumption and production. It is defined as the creation of new markets, products or services and processes, driven by social, ethical and environmental (sustainable) issues (Little, 2004; Charter & Clark, 2007). Sustainability-led innovation has been recognised as necessary since the sustainable development debate emerged in the 1980s and was reinforced since 1990s by the United Nations and the European Com-

mission. However it has remained mainly peripheral in tourism studies (Hjalager, 1996; Carlsen, Libur, Edwards, & Forde, 2008).

In this paper, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication is outlined as a key concept for building knowledge on sustainability-led innovation. Our main assumption is that CSR communication, when dealing with tourists as active citizens and not only as consumers, provides tools, examples, skills and language to amplify a *collective voice*, so that deep change can come to the sector. New forms of communicating sustainability-led innovation are discussed in order for sustainability ideas and practices to more rapidly transform tourist behaviour and tourism sector towards sustainability.

### Research Design

The cross-sector literature review is used as a tool for eliciting challenges, potentials and forms of communicating sustainability-led innovation in tourism. The literature review was designed to address the following research questions on sustainability-led innovation: How is sustainability-led innovation defined and conceptualised? What are traditional and emerging drivers of sustainable innovation? How is sustainability-led innovation communicated and with what effect? These questions were elaborated in the protocols that guided the review. The review was focused on three sectors: tourism, fashion and design. Papers from international conferences on sustainable innovation (Sustainable Innovation, annually organised by the Centre for Sustainable Design, University College for the Creative Arts, Surrey, United Kingdom), as well as international case studies on innovation for sustainability in tourism and the fashion industry were identified and examined for detailed analysis. To ensure that the focus of the literature review is clear, we define the terms used in the research questions through general literature on sustainable innovation and CSR communication.

### Sustainability-Led Innovation: Definitions and Concepts

Sustainability-led innovation is a process in which sustainability considerations (environmental, social, eth-

ical) are integrated into company systems from idea generation through research and development to commercialisation (Little, 2004). This applies to products, services and technologies, as well as new businesses, organisation models and systems at the societal level (Charter & Clark, 2007). An alternative term is 'eco-innovation.' It is described as 'the process of developing new products, processes or services which provide customer and business value but significantly decrease environmental impact' (James, 1997), or more precisely as 'the creation of novel and competitively priced goods, processes, systems, services, and procedures designed to satisfy human needs and provide a better quality of life for all, with a life-cycle minimal use of natural resources per unit output' (Europa INNOVA Thematic Workshop). Although the two terms may be used interchangeably, eco-innovation addresses only environmental dimensions while sustainability-led innovation also embraces the broader social and ethical dimensions.

Charter and Clark (2007) enumerate a spectrum of levels of sustainability-led innovation, from incremental to radical:

- Level 1 (incremental): small, progressive improvements to existing product/services.
- Level 2 (re-design to 'green limits'): major re-design of existing products/services.
- Level 3 (alternative): new product/service to satisfy the same functional need.
- Level 4 (radical, systems): new product/service design for a sustainable society.

Most innovations are incremental, re-design, or niche market offerings. Few companies have started to incorporate sustainability into the core creativity phase of new product/service and business development processes (Charter and Clark, 2007).

The current paradigm of sustainability in tourism is also focused on environmental aspects and on incremental or green re-design rather than more radical levels of innovation. The primary focus of this study is on higher levels of sustainable innovation, which may contribute to significant impacts in sustainable tourism development.

Various papers (Little, 2004; Charter & Tischner,

2001; Fletcher & Grose, 2011) illustrate how new concepts and techniques may be applied to fostering sustainable innovation at a system level. Fletcher and Grose (2011) advocate the sustainable transformation of the fashion system through following set of innovation opportunities: adaptability, trans-seasonality, empathy, low-impact use, speed, needs, local, sharing and engaging. Perhaps not all elements are applicable to the tourism sector, but their relevance is worth testing in the field of tourism innovation at a system level.

Sustainable innovation at a system level is only likely to occur if there are strong triggers and drivers to overcome powerful inertia and other obstacles in existing economic, social and other systems. Charter and Clark (2007) have highlighted existing and emerging drivers for sustainably led innovation at the system level, valid for all sectors, including tourism. These are:

- Key environmental and resource risks (such as pollution, increasing consumption of energy, climate change, water shortages).
- Product environmental legislation (such as promoting tools to reduce lifecycle impacts).
- Market drivers (such as a good brand trend, green mainstream, social responsible investment).
- Sustainable consumption (such as promoting sustainable lifestyles, sustainable public procurement).

While environmental risks, legislation and market are continuing drivers of sustainable innovation in all sectors, sustainable consumption policy is still a relatively new and emerging area in sustainable innovation management. At a system level, approaches to understanding and achieving sustainable consumption are of fundamental importance.

### **Innovation for Sustainable Consumption: Towards Clearer Goals**

Environmental philosopher Kate Rawles acknowledged difficulties in changing dominant thinking and behaving, since people 'cling to the status quo' (Rawles, 2009, p. 40). 'In our society there is a perceived right to consume, and the 'customer is king' is still the key driver for many companies,' stated Charter and Clark

(2007, p. 33). Various authors call for systems changes, clearer goals and long term education for sustainable consumption. To move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption, whole systems and business models have to be transformed.

Environmental and social problems have no purely technical or market-based solutions, rather their solutions are moral and ethical, and require the whole sector to look at what shapes, directs and motivates the bigger system. Fletcher and Grose who work on fostering and cultivating sustainability benefits in the fashion industry, argue that most goals, rules and mindsets of business models remain unacknowledged and unquestioned in the principal industry cycles. Arguing that, they quote industrial ecologist John R. Ehrenfeld, who suggests: 'Discipline yourself to live inside the questions..., then you will slowly be able to discard the old tried, but no longer true, answers and replace them with new, effective ways of building a sustainable future' (Fletcher & Grose, 2011, p. 75).

For building a sustainable system, being is essential from both sides - producers and consumers. Still, many consumers are passive rather than active as they perceive themselves to be on the 'receiving end' of the industry's cycle. Marchand and Walker's research (Fletcher & Grose, 2011, p. 139) on what motivates people to downshift to simpler, non-consumerist lifestyles provides some valuable insights into people's behaviour around sustainability. They note that presenting the problems in the world simply as a set of abstract concepts that are 'out there' (e.g. pollution) and 'somewhere else' (e.g. child labour or prostitution) means that people understand them only intellectually; this is why they can easily set them aside as consumers.

Much of the literature examining consumers' responsible behaviour suggests that the more information consumers have, the more responsible their actions will be (Neagu 2011). People working in companies, and specifically in research and development (R&D) or corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments, hold considerably more knowledge about the ecological and social impacts of production and consumption than consumers. 'Yet rarely is this knowledge communicated beyond the confines of the tech-

nical functions on the supply chain to society more broadly' (Fletcher & Grose, 2011, p. 157). In particular, corporate (CSR) and marketing communications have potentially pivotal roles in fostering sustainability-led innovation (Charter & Clark, 2007). Although the CSR and marketing communication roles in the innovation process differ from company to company and also from sector to sector, generally there is a weak interaction between marketing and CSR professionals. New patterns of consumer behaviour and opportunities that producers are already exploring show that experts in creating, producing and marketing are on their way to finding new modes of operating – as communicators, educators and even activists.

Over the previous decade, the practice of co-creation in designing products with users rather than for users has been on the rise. 'Co-creation platforms' (Chesbrough, 2012, p. 16) are now new spaces where consumers and producers (development staff) come together to create new solutions. Their face-to-face interaction and communication is a powerful way to stimulate sustainability-led innovation. As producers themselves are becoming new agents of sustainable consumption change, the first thing to be implemented in sustainable consumption policies should be their broader and effective way of communicating sustainability-led innovation.

### **CSR Communication: Communicating with Customers as Active Citizens**

Studies show that what is communicated by companies about sustainable innovation is usually shaped by an organisation's image, corporate culture and reputation. Issues in sustainability-led innovation are mostly communicated as brand differentiation. Marketing communications that reduce sustainability-led innovation to simple slogans on existing or green re-designed products have limited environmental or social qualities but reflect clear intentions of leading to increased sales and market shares. 'Today, all companies speak to their customers as consumers; barely any also speak to them as *active citizens*,' claim Fletcher and Grose (2011, p. 157).

Companies usually do not give their customers the occasion to ask questions and build knowledge about,

for example, an ecosystem's carrying capacity, resource efficiency or improved workers' rights. Therefore, sustainability and corporate social responsibility philosophies encourages businesses to use their communications, expertise and other resources to improve society, not only their companies and industries (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Silence or a lack of response to the troubles of the world, or refusal to acknowledge that products are somehow implicated in the production of troubles of the others, is critically described by Dunne, Harney and Parker (2008) as *irresponsible* corporate communication. 'Speaking out is the core of responsibility, whether in terms of its "corporate social" variety [...] the enactments of the world social forums, or everyday senses of obligation and care,' claim the authors (Dunne et al., 2008, p. 275). 'Speaking out' is becoming central to building knowledge in the general population around natural systems and their interconnections with human systems.

In contrast, the literature on corporate social responsibility still relegates communication a role on the periphery (Ihlen, Bertlett, & May, 2011, p. 10). While there is vast literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR), the literature on CSR communication is disproportionately small. Recently turning to the communication theory, work on CSR communication has been published within fields such as public relations (Golob & Bartlett, 2007), corporate communications (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2007) and marketing communications (Podnar, 2008). Authors from the communication disciplines claim CSR communications in different sectors need to be dealt with authentically and by developing engaged and ongoing relationships rather than through one-way communication. 'Thinking holistically about the company's corporate citizenship, understanding what stage of development the company is in, fully articulating and implementing the company's value throughout the company's value chain are necessary components of the effective CSR communications strategy' (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 41).

Based on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) characterisation of models of public relations, Morsing and Schultz (2006) unfold three types of relations in terms of how companies strategically manage CSR communication: information strategy, response strategy and involve-

ment strategy. Their findings show people understand that CSR is of high importance to companies, while at the same time they have mixed opinions about how companies should communicate their CSR efforts: whether through public relations and advertising, through more subtle ways of CSR communications, or not communicating on CSR issues at all. Communication about CSR is sometimes suspected as serving corporate self-interest only.

Nevertheless, companies cannot not communicate on CSR issues. Their communication on sustainability-led innovation has to create feelings regarding the environmental and ethical issues, and it has to encourage responsible behaviour. The CSR communication that triggers responsible behaviour should be cognitive (informative), affective (feeling creation) and conative (action stimulation) (Neagu, 2011).

Studies show that the most effective CSR communication does not always manifest itself in traditional forms of communications. Since interactive digital campaigns have replaced most traditional advertising and PR communication, new ways of communicating sustainability-led innovation have emerged. New prototypes of CSR communication that have emerged are mostly hands-on workshops, internet competitions and calls to action. The following examples are from the fashion, design and tourism sectors:

1. The Permacouture Institute, founded by artist and designer Sasha Duerr, organizes dye workshops where participants forage for plants and make dye baths to colour their own fabric yarn. These creative exchange culminate in a dinner arranged around the same plants used as ingredients in the meal, thereby linking together food, fibre and textiles . . . Events are a combination of activity and creativity, and the knowledge gained stays with the individual, opening up minds to the potential of clothing becoming reconnected to natural systems and cycles (Fletcher & Grose, 2011, p. 158).
2. To nurture and grow sustainable innovation requires a supportive organizational culture with a bias to openness to radical ideas, experimentation, action and learning. Nike developed a cus-

tommer-based project named *Considered* which has delivered a range of benefits including new thinking, product innovation, as well as indirect production innovation. As a result of the success of *Considered*, Nike is presently considering how to integrate sustainability into its design process and develop a new system and language around sustainable product design. The designers achieved impressive environmental statistics: a reduction of 61 percent in manufacturing waste, 35 percent in energy consumption and 89 percent in the use of solvents. In addition, Nike employed boutique design firm Hunter Gatherer to create an animated spot for the Nike *Considered* line utilized in its viral marketing (Charter & Clark, 2007, p. 17).

3. The Ecocean case study is a story of innovation through lateral thinking and making seemingly unrelated connections. Ecocean is an organisation highly motivated to raise awareness, research and work to preserve whale sharks, a rare marine animal. This has been operationalized through building personal, public, non-governmental organisation and government agency support. Lobbying to establish national and international conservation measures for whale sharks has engaged governments. Accessing tourists as whale shark researchers built public support and awareness. The approach also functioned as an efficient cost effective means of collecting information on a global scale. The development of the whale shark online image library was a core component of the success of this approach, enabling tourists encountering whale sharks to contribute their images for research. The image analysis approach was made viable by adapting and applying software originally designed for the Hubble Space Telescope (Carlsen et al., 2008, p. 27).

As all three cases show, these new types of CSR communication are designed to disrupt current ways of thinking while developing new ones. The knowledge of sustainability-led innovations is built on experiential, presentational, propositional and practical ways. CSR communication seems to be most effective

tive when grounded in experience, presented through stories and images, understood through theories that make sense to the audience, and expressed in meaningful actions in their lives. Of course, further research is needed to determine and test the potentials of CSR communication in tourism to change minds, attitudes and behaviour towards more sustainable society.

### Conclusions

This study shows that CSR communication has a potential pivotal role for the sustainability-led innovation to trigger systems change. Critical analysis of the findings from the cross-sector literature review suggests that CSR communications in different sectors need to be dealt with authentically and by developing engaged and ongoing relationships, rather than through one-way communication. The primary focus of the study was on higher levels of sustainable innovation, which may contribute to significant impacts in sustainable tourism development. With cross-sector review findings, how new concepts and communication techniques could be applied to fostering sustainable innovation at a system level was illustrated. The main assumption of this study was that communication, when dealing with customers as active citizens (CSR communication) and not only as consumers (marketing communication), could provide new tools, examples, skills and language to amplify a collective voice, so that deep change can come to the sector. The study has confirmed that the most effective CSR communication does not always manifest itself in traditional forms of communications. When knowledge on sustainability-led innovations was built on experiential, presentational, propositional and practical levels, consumers started to recognise their collective position within larger economic, cultural or ecological systems.

Implications of this cross-sectoral 'closed loop' on communication area of sustainability-led innovation are two-fold: (1) Influencing the tourism mainstream may be one of the greatest challenges for sustainability and one of its greatest potentials; (2) CSR communication in tourism can be an effective vehicle for changing minds, attitudes and behaviour of today's mobile cultures.

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