

Sustainable Tourism: Introduction to the Thematic Block

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Despite three decades of active and intense discussion of tourism sustainability in academia and in tourism practice, recent references have shown that there is still much room for progress in this research area. At this very moment of a new milestone for tourism and society as a whole, new circumstances have arisen that change our understanding and suggest new choices that shift the concept of sustainable tourism as we have known it. The pandemic can be seen as one of the challenges, and it offers an opportunity to rethink our understanding of sustainable tourism (Persson-Fischer & Liu, 2021). But, even before the pandemic, it was clear that sustainable tourism, as a fluid and complex paradigm, urgently requires a systematic shift in comprehension. It therefore seems timely to review the progress of this tourism development concept and explore its possible future directions (Nunkoo & Seetanah, 2019).

Sustainable tourism is now considered the dominant development paradigm in tourism research (Ruhanen et al., 2015; Bramwell & Lane, 2012), but it is rather inconstant and dynamic, which requires a precise, continuous and appropriate approach. Indeed, there is a plethora of relevant academic papers on this topic, providing valuable knowledge and understanding of the concept, as well as strategies and instruments for sustainable tourism implementation. An example of sustainable tourism indicators, designed by

the World Economic Forum, is the Global Sustainable Competitiveness Index (GSCI), which was developed in 2012 as a subsection of the earlier well known and acknowledged Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index (TTCI). On the other hand, there still persists a critical gap between the theory and practice of sustainability in tourism. Moreover, the prevailing economic indicators used by the United Nations World Travel Organization (UNWTO) and many other tourism organisations (national, regional, and local), professionals and decision makers with a mindset that sustainability is merely an environmental issue, show how incomplete our knowledge and awareness of sustainable tourism is. Furthermore, recent social and technological changes in our society pose a great challenge and open new questions that need to be addressed and answered.

Ruhanen et al. (2019) investigated how research on sustainable tourism has evolved in the more than thirty years since the publication of the Brundtland report. They show that the field of research has matured over the past five years to the point where emphasis on climate change, modelling, values, behaviour and theoretical advancement in sustainable tourism have become important. Budeanu et al. (2015) pointed out the problem of low or even lack of criticality in sustainable tourism research and suggested the need for research contributions to improve adaptability to

respond to and manage change under unpredictable circumstances. In a nutshell, they believe that the research conducted on this topic needs to be more effective in the future, and provide tourism practitioners with concrete solutions and tools. Additionally, they assigned to tourism sustainability the transformative power of the wider society due to its interrelationships with other spheres of human life and the economic sectors. They concluded that (p. 16) the academic world of tourism is a relatively small community and certainly one that is disproportionately tiny in relation to the size of the sector and its impacts. It would be necessary to bring additional academic capacity to the subject in order to achieve a strong outcome that could help to develop a solid ground for its development and progress.

Sharpley (2020) is very critical towards tourism and argues that its developmental role, unequal accessibility, degree of dependency, overconsumption and overproduction are the biggest challenges at the global level. The only solution he sees to reduce the use of fossil fuel in tourism in the future is to reduce air travel. Zhang and Chan (2020) problematised the vague conceptualisation of sustainable tourism and pointed it out as the reason for its ineffectiveness and underperformance in practice. They believe that sustainable development is a resource-concerned ethic, which should be concerned with resources and human needs in each specific context. Conversely, Streimikiene et al. (2021, p. 265) sound much more optimistic by concluding that competitiveness, environmental and social issues of sustainable tourism development can be addressed together by implementing innovations and fostering sustainable consumption principles. Providing innovative tourism services to tourists, achieving a competitive advantage by contributing to welfare, satisfying the needs of local communities, and addressing sustainable development priorities of tourism destinations are achievable goals.

Whether this shift in the current comprehension of sustainable development lies in the responsible behaviour and actions of stakeholders, or in the balanced performance of these actions and collaboration between stakeholders, sustainable tourism as it was defined and understood three decades ago is no

longer relevant due to the maturation of the concept.

The collection of papers in this thematic block inspired by the above discussion brings together selected papers presented at the International Tourism Conference Encuentros 2020 – Sustainable Destinations: Walking the Sustainable Talk. To ensure an even more diverse selection of articles on sustainable tourism, the call for papers was disseminated to the wider research community after the conference. Afterwards, many interesting manuscripts were submitted for publication consideration, but the guest editors had to limit the number of papers selected in order to proceed with the publication process for the most theoretically and empirically high-quality papers.

This thematic block contains six articles authored by scholars from diverse geographic and research backgrounds addressing key issues in sustainable tourism: community participation, resident quality of life, ICM principles of an island destination, climate change, environmentally sustainable practices in hospitality and sustainable tourism competitiveness.

The first research paper, 'Community Participation in Sustainable Valorisation of Cultural Heritage: The Case of the Municipality of Vršar' by Kristina Afrić Rakitovac, Nataša Urošević and Nikola Vojnović, illustrates the role of community participation as an essential principle of sustainable tourism. It explores the perspective of the local community in relation to the sustainable valorisation of cultural and archaeological heritage and finds that local stakeholders are interested in the sustainable development of cultural tourism that opposes the mass tourism that currently prevails. Furthermore, it confirms the aspiration of the community to be actively involved and informed in participatory models of heritage management. The findings of the research point to the need for knowledge capacity building and awareness raising among stakeholders and destination management in order to optimise the sustainable valorisation of heritage resources.

The example of sustainable development of an island destination based on ICM principles by Aleksandra Krajnović, Ivica Zdrilić and Nikolina Miletić explores its extent and factors influencing it on the Island of Pag among key tourism stakeholders. The research

findings show unsatisfactory conditions of sustainable development due to mass tourism, extreme seasonality, excessive tourism construction and unbalanced development. The situation urgently calls for professional destination management.

The article titled 'A Destination's Social Sustainability: Linking Tourism Development to Residents' Quality of Life' by colleagues from Turistica, namely Emil Juvan, Eva Podovšovnik, Miha Lesjak and Jasmina Jurgec, examines residents' quality of life as a fundamental aspect of sustainable tourism development. The results show that interaction with tourists can play a more important role in life satisfaction than the level of tourism development. Besides this, the results indicate that neither the level of tourism development nor the interactions with tourists predict the life satisfaction of hosts and their emotional well-being. The authors highlight that achieving social sustainability is significantly context dependent and suggest a mixed methodological approach for further research, combining a quantitative and qualitative approach.

Tourism management beliefs and attitudes towards climate change are addressed by Aleksandar Racz, Dora Smolčić Jurdana and Zvonimira Šverko Grdić, colleagues from Croatia. They point out that significant change in sustainable development is possible by understanding attitudes and beliefs of managers in order to manage the risks and opportunities for change in unsustainable practices. The research findings have shown stronger pro-ecological attitudes and higher levels of ecological awareness regarding climate change among female managers, with tertiary education, greater professional experience and environmentally active individuals.

From the other side of the world comes 'A Study of Barriers of Environmentally Sustainable Practices in the Hotel Businesses in Punjab, India: Preliminary Findings' by Baljit Kaur, with the aim of exploring the barriers of environmentally sustainable practices (ESPs) in the area of hotel business. The issue of sustainability examined from the perspective of the hotel industry points to the need for information sharing and environmental awareness between policy makers and managers, changing conventional work practices, developing positive environmental attitudes, strict en-

vironmental legislation, and involving top management in implementation strategies.

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