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# Tourism in challenging times: resilience or creativity?

*Greg Richards*<sup>1,2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, resilience is often seen as a key strategy. We argue that resilience, with its emphasis on a return to normality, needs to be re-considered. We outline a development strategy based on creativity, which seeks to link local resources and communities with global flows of resources, knowledge, and people. Creativity has been identified as an important element of previous crisis recovery strategies, and arguably it can go further, offering new avenues for future development that go beyond the new normal. Building new relationalities becomes an important aspect of this strategy.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Creativity, Creative tourism, resilience

## INTRODUCTION

As numerous studies have shown, the pandemic has decimated the tourism sector and created increasing uncertainty about the future of tourism businesses worldwide. This has stimulated thinking about how tourism can find the road to recovery (Burini, 2020). What many are seeking is a return to ‘normality’, or what now seems like a relatively simple existence before we had to deal with facemasks and social distancing. The hope is that everything will be back to normal once a vaccine is found. But the reality is likely to be much harsher: it will take time for the vaccine to curb the virus, in which time more will lose their lives, more businesses will disappear, and attitudes to travel and leisure will change. The new tourism landscape will not look like the old, and new tourists will not behave as they did in the past. This arguably requires not just resilience, but also creativity to find new ways of developing and managing tourism.

This paper considers the challenges of the pandemic for tourism in terms of potential development trajectories. Drawing on recent research in Asia in particular, it outlines the role of creative development strategies in providing alternative pathways for the post-pandemic future.

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## APPROACHES TO RESILIENCE

Resilience means the ability to return to the original form after being compressed or strained. In terms of cities dealing with mass cultural tourism, for example, this means the ability to absorb relatively large numbers of tourists without losing the form and function of basic systems, such as the cultural system. After the current Covid-19 pandemic, however, it is questionable whether we would want resilience to mean “a return to the original form” for tourism. The “original form” desired by different groups in the city might vary widely. Residents may want the atmosphere to return to the streets, but not as many tourists. The businesses in the city will want the crowds to return as soon as possible because that means more spending and support for jobs. Some tourists may want the current normal to continue because it means they can visit popular tourist attractions without the crowds.

Perhaps instead of thinking about resilience as a return to normal, it might be more constructive to view tourism as a resilient system, which is capable of responding to change: “a resilient region is like a healthy immune system: rather than preparing for every possible scenario, the region fortifies its underlying resources and capabilities to quickly mobilize and respond to any disruptive event.” (Eisenhauer, 2014).

As Lew (2014) notes, in tourism, the concept of resilience has largely focused on economic resilience, ignoring issues of cultural or social resilience. And yet, if we consider tourism in major cities, tourism is highly dependent on social and cultural systems, and economic resilience ultimately depends on the resilience of these systems as well. People travel to cities not to spend money or create jobs for local people, but to experience the culture of the city for themselves, and to become part of the cultural life of the city for a short while (Russo and Richards, 2016). In looking at the resilience of the tourism system, therefore, it is important to assess the level of collaboration and synergy between sectors such as tourism and culture, which provides some of the most important resources for developing tourism. As Lew (2014) argues, destinations must be ready to cope with the modification, deterioration or complete loss of not just tourism facilities, but also environmental and cultural tourism resources; tourist markets; and skilled employees. In the current pandemic, all these areas are suddenly relevant at once, and they are all interconnected. The resources that attract tourists depend on them for their economic sustainability, but they are also the facilities that cater for locals and which attract skilled workers. It is therefore important to understand not just the impact on the tourist system, but also all the interconnected parts of the economic, social, and cultural systems of places.

## THE NEED FOR CREATIVITY

The idea of returning to “business as usual” is unlikely to work. Many tourism administrations have adopted the response-recovery-resilience paradigm in approaching the pandemic. Although a response is essential in the short term, the idea of resilience is unlikely to prove adequate in the longer term. We should see the pandemic not just as a major challenge, but also

as a major opportunity to change previous models of tourism. We need to develop new ideas about how to travel and how to develop the tourism industry in the post-pandemic world. This requires creativity and innovation, but our thinking about creativity also needs to change. Tourism businesses have long viewed creativity as a simple application of design or branding to travel products. But as Hildreth (2008) has emphasised, changing our brand is no longer enough – we need to make our reality better.

In making a better reality we should think more holistically about the challenge of the pandemic. It is not simply a question of people being able to travel again, but a fundamental question about how people will travel in the future. Before the pandemic, we had intense discussions about the challenges of overtourism. This was instantly solved by the arrival of Covid-19, but if old-style travel returns, we will soon have old-style overtourism back as well.

A return to the “old normal” of tourism is even more likely if current policies are not changed. For example, the idea of developing Indonesia’s tourism industry through the development of “10 new Bali’s” is a process of serial reproduction of what is seen as a successful tourism model. But this begs the question of whether copies of Balinese tourism development in other parts of Indonesia are desirable. Even before the pandemic, Indonesia’s original target of attracting 20 million international tourists was not met. The actual number of international arrivals reached 16.1 million in 2019, and in 2020 the impact of Covid-19 caused a steep fall in arrivals, in common with other destinations. Total arrivals for 2020 are now likely to be less than 4.5 million. The question might be – is it sensible to return to a high growth strategy based on significant infrastructure development, or should a new form of tourism industry be developed that is tailored to achieving higher value from the smaller numbers now likely to arrive? When we think about the value to be generated from tourism, we should also think about all potential forms of value – cultural, educational, symbolic, social, intrinsic, institutional – rather than just economic value (Richards, 2020a).

We need to develop creative solutions for the future of tourism to rethink, reinvent, and reimagine tourism, rather than just making it resilient. Creativity can be applied in a variety of ways: through creative people, creative processes, creative products, and creative places. Richards (2011) argues that all four of these meanings are found in tourism, for example through visits to creative clusters and districts, the use of creative products as attractions (e.g. travel related to literary figures, artists, etc.), using the creative process in designing creative activities for tourists (e.g. design, workshops) and creative cities and regions strategies (such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network).

Increasingly, the convergence of tourism and the creative economy means that all of these different applications of creativity in tourism can provide opportunities for destinations, as Indonesia and some other countries have recognised in the creation of joint ministries for tourism and creative economy. As the OECD (2014) report on *Tourism and the Creative Economy* points out, there are many synergies to be generated through the combination of tourism and creativity.

One possibility, as Ollivaud and Haxton (2019) suggest, is to tap into the vast creative potential that countries like Indonesia have. As they point out:

“The creative economy can help offer new products and services for new target groups away from conventional models of environmental or heritage-based cultural tourism: that can be through unconventional media advertisements, arts creation in a specific building, and sound-and-light shows. Increasingly visitors are looking for experience-based, instead of destination-based, tourism.”

In the Indonesian context, this is most likely to be successful in areas such as Bali, which has access to a more highly educated workforce. The use of knowledge and creativity to develop more high-value forms of tourism seems a more fruitful path for future development than a return to previous models based on large numbers of low-cost tourists. Do we need 10 more Bali’s in Indonesia, or do we need a different type of Bali?

An important starting point in developing creative alternatives is to consider the resources available for creative development. In the case of Indonesia, for example, there is potential to tap into the creative resources of local wisdom. Local wisdom is “a form of culture that can be defined as the whole system of ideas, action, and results of human’s work in social life that is possessed through learning” (Pesurnay, 2018). These local knowledge resources can be used to develop links between communities, their environment, traditions, and tourism, to create new creative experiences (Singsomboon, 2014). Similar programmes have already been developed with some success by DASTA in Thailand, which has applied contemporary design principles to traditional knowledge and creativity to develop creative experiences for tourists (Richards, 2020b). These new creative experiences emphasise community control of the creative process and the development of experiences, which helps to increase the sustainability of the programme. This is also an interesting example of how contemporary techniques of experience design can be applied to traditional knowledge and creativity to provide economic, social, and cultural benefits for the community (Richards, Wisansing, and Paschinger, 2019).

## CREATIVE TOURISM AS A RELATIONAL DEVICE

One important outcome of the recent research in Thailand is the growing recognition that creative tourism is not just about developing creative experiences for tourists, but it is also about developing the relationality of tourism (Richards, 2014). Creative tourism, as a system that involves the physical co-presence of the local creative community and the visitors, generates not just an increase in creative skills and knowledge, but also relationships, which can provide creative potential far beyond the physical encounter itself. The nature of these creative tourism encounters goes beyond the traditional economic exchange of tourism, to include the exchange of knowledge, skills, and ideas attached to the creative process. There is also a reversal of the traditional power relations of tourism, as the tourist comes to learn from the knowledgeable and skilled local (Duxbury and Richards, 2019).

One of the basic reasons for the success of creative tourism has been the collective, relational nature of the experiences it provides. In creative tourism, creativity is not viewed just as a quality of the individual, but also as a relational phenomenon that links visitors to the places they visit, and which links together people in those places around the creative assets they have. This distinguishes the approach of creative tourism from concepts such as Florida's (2002) "creative class", which attaches creativity primarily to individuals, and their consumption. Focusing on creativity also gives more attention to the role of the producer or maker, moving from a purely consumption-based approach to tourism and creativity, to include a production focus (O'Connor, 2009).

If we see creativity as a collective endeavour, then it becomes a means to bind local communities and to help to make the places they live in better. The point about creative tourism is that not only are the tourists creatively engaged, but the local community has to become more creative in the identification, valorization, and use of creative resources. By highlighting the value of these resources for visitors, you also begin to underline the importance of these resources for local people as well. This should lead to a re-evaluation of place, and a greater appreciation of the links between communities, creative skills and resources, and the places these are embedded in.

The importance of creativity has been highlighted by the effects of the pandemic. The limitations imposed on travel and events mean that cultural and creative tourism is one of the most hard-hit areas of economic and social activity. At the moment people can't travel in search of new experiences, and they also have to practice social distancing, which makes it extremely challenging to organise events, workshops, guided tours, and other common forms of cultural and creative tourism.

At the same time, isolation has highlighted our need for social contact and the collective practices of culture and creativity. People have found creative ways to deal with the lockdown, from balcony concerts to music performed via Zoom meetings. Museums, theatres, and cinemas have put their content online. This is the resilient and creative spirit that also needs to be harnessed in recovering from the pandemic.

We should also learn from the creative processes that have been kick-started by other disasters, such as the Christchurch earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 (Richards and Duif, 2018). There we saw the emergence of grass-roots creative placemaking, where artistic and community events were staged as a means of bringing people together and enabling them to think about the future development of the city and the community. The crisis led to the valorization of new resources: "In Christchurch the community created spaces for sharing food and, through this, socializing." (Aleffi and Cavicchi, 2020). This experience has been reflected in the aftermath of other disasters, such as the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, of which Bernan and Roel (1993) observed that "crises bring about marked regressions as well as opportunities for creativity and new options" (p. 82). In Italy, the earthquakes in 2016 and 2017 stimulated many creative responses, which included the pooling of knowledge, capacity building, moving the

sale of gastronomic products online, etc. These are examples of creative resilience that also build new possibilities for the future.

We have already seen a number of such initiatives in the current pandemic. For example, the Swedish ‘Table for One’ gastronomic experience, in which a single diner was able to enjoy a meal in the middle of a field (Åkerström, 2020). Dishes using local ingredients were delivered to the table by a pulley system from the farm. The design of the menu was supposed to inspire the feeling of gastronomic travel: “The food is a way of sending people to a warm and slow night in Barcelona since we’re unable to travel during these times.” Stalker (2020), reviewing initiatives in Canada, argues “There may be nothing like a worldwide pandemic to heighten travel industry creativity.” He cites many examples of creative tourism initiatives, which include people in a hotel sharing their cooking and hospitality skills with people via YouTube to help them through confinement, and a winery that used their dog to deliver wine to customers parked in their cars, and virtual road trips provided by the regional tourist board. In all of these examples, we see the importance of community engagement as a means of sustaining creative activities, which in turn sustain tourism activities and therefore the economy.

These examples underline two important aspects of creative development that will be important in recovering from the crisis:

1) Anchoring creativity in the local “space of places”

Creativity is difficult to sustain in the abstract – it has to mean something to people. Creative tourism, therefore, needs to follow the principles of creative placemaking, and ensure that local creative resources are given meaning for all stakeholders- residents, visitors, policymakers, businesses, etc. This is the only way to ensure long term sustainability.

2) Linking with the global “space of flows”

The meaning attached to local creativity should not just be local, but also global. The global space of flows provides the link with external resources, new ideas, and visitors. Seeing our resources through the eyes of the tourist also helps us to value them in new ways.

Ultimately creative tourism is a system of co-creation between the global space of flows and the local space of places (Richards, 2015) – between communities embedded in places and the people who visit. Local creative resources can provide new, engaging experiences for visitors, but they also support new creative possibilities for local people – and the real transformation lies in the relational encounters that are produced by creative tourism.

In the short term, these encounters may have to be more limited, relying on the phenomenon of ‘tourist in your own city’, or ‘tourist in your own region’ (Richards, 2017). But we shouldn’t forget that many of the participants in creative tourism programmes are already local people, driven by a curiosity to see the familiar with new eyes.

These kinds of encounters can arguably provide linkages to wider knowledge networks and creative resources, which can help local communities develop their future potential. This is not the return to old models offered by resilience strategies, but the development of new potentials and futures offered by the sustainable resource of creativity.

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