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Sustainable Tourism Development: Critically Challenging Some Assumptions

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has long been perceived as a passport to development in Pacific Island Countries and Territories. That much is generally accepted. But how it contributes to sustainable development and what type of tourism is most appropriate to contribute to sustainable tourism development in a globalised world is much more contested. This contribution may well be significantly reshaped through existential crises such as climate disaster and pandemics. This paper draws out several of David Harrison's challenges to accepted thinking about sustainable tourism development: how tourism contributes to poverty alleviation; how the scale of tourism impacts sustainable tourism development and the role international tourism plays in a globalised interconnected world are the three issues that are examined. Through critically analyzing these issues, a more nuanced approach, as outlined by Harrison, more accurately reflects the situation and offers grounds for better scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Mass tourism; tourism development; small scale tourism; poverty alleviation; Pacific Islands

Introduction

As mass tourism grew quickly in the post-World War II era, tourism was perceived by many to be a tool for development (De Kadt, 1979). With the emergence of this phenomenon, tourism started to be viewed through the lens of development theory (Harrison, 2014). This paper draws on David Harrison's work on tourism and development, specifically as it relates to sustainability using the context of tourism in Pacific Island Countries and Territories, a context that David was very familiar with having been based in Fiji while working at the University of the South Pacific for numerous years. This paper will draw out the nuanced conclusions that David arrived at through his study of tourism in the Pacific and elsewhere. The conclusions from a review of David's work would be that tourism generally contributes to development, but whether it is sustainable tourism development, and what sustainable tourism development looks like, at least in Pacific Island Countries and Territories, is open to interpretation.

Tourism and development

One of David's contributions to the area of tourism, development and tourism development reflects the firm grounding that David had as a sociologist/anthropologist. Specifically, and as discussed at greater length in Sharpley's contribution to this commemorative special issue of *Tourism, Planning & Development*, he provides an historical overview of the theories of tourism development in his critical review of the intersection between tourism and development theory (Harrison (2015). Two of the main competing theories of the time were Modernisation theory and Underdevelopment/Dependency theory (Harrison, 2001). The Modernisation approach was implicit in much tourism policy and planning and aligns with Jafari's advocacy platform (Jafari, 1990) whereby tourism is seen as a "smokeless" industry that can generate jobs and income, having few negative impacts (MacNaught, 1982). In contrast, Britton (1982) argued that Less Developed Countries, on the world's periphery, provided a playground for tourists from the metropole where class and regional inequalities, economic problems and social tensions arose, creating a situation of dependency and another form of (neo)colonialism. But according to Harrison (1988), neither Modernisation theory nor Dependency theory could entirely account for what was being empirically observed.

With the rise of environmentalism in the 1970s and into the 1980s, alternative forms of tourism and, subsequently, sustainable tourism development became the focus of much research and increasing industry and policymaker interest (Honey, 2002; Mowforth & Munt, 2015). However, sustainable tourism development immediately was, and remains, a much-contested term (Harrison, 1996), though this is not surprising given the ambiguity and controversy of such terms as "development" and "sustainability". Many scholars have argued that putting the two terms together is an oxymoron (Redclift, 2005) whilst David referred to the term as "virtually useless" (Harrison, 2001, p. 8).

David recognised that tourism is just one of the forces in an increasingly globalised world and should be considered in the wider environmental, social and economic context. Noting that environmentalism, modernisation theory and underdevelopment theory have converged under the overall umbrella of "globalization" theory, he developed a working model of tourism which takes into account the international context with its supranational organisations and bilateral relations of the sending and receiving societies along with the characteristics of both the tourism industry and the external environment (type of economy, cultural and social factors, history, political structure). These factors will then influence the types and magnitudes of economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism, which will also be dependent on the types of tourists, their motivations for travel, and the degree of interaction with the host community. While the characteristics of tourism are important, the model's focus is on the social, political, and economic structures of societies that receive tourists in shaping the role and structure of visitors in these societies (Harrison, 2015).

Another useful contribution to tourism development studies was David's conceptualisation of how the study of tourism can be approached where the level of analysis can range from the individual and their social roles (level 1) to the social structure (level 2) and then to the macro level of globalisation and international systems (level 3) (Harrison, 2007). The utility of this approach was to allow a more thorough, comparative, and cohesive knowledge of tourism's role and importance in society. One of the advantages of

considering this framework is that it shows how awareness of the three analytical levels helps assist in framing research questions and in comparing research results across contexts.

Sustainable tourism development

So, if tourism is seen to be a popular tool for development, to what extent can it be sustainable, however the concept might be defined? How might sustainable tourism be implemented in practice (Harrison, 1996)? At the turn of the twenty-first Century, attention turned from a debate about definitions and conceptualisation of the word to what sustainability looked like in practice. Other scholars (Bianchi, 2018; Saarinen, 2006) critiqued, deepened and advanced new, critically-informed interpretations of sustainability, questioning whether tourism can ever be truly sustainable within the prevailing systemic nature of global capitalism, the industrial organisation of tourism and global commodity chains.

Measuring and evaluating the degree of tourism sustainability coincided with the advent of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These eight international development goals were established by the United Nations in 2000, measured by 21 targets, and covered the period up to 2015 (United Nations, 2000). The relationship between tourism and the MDGs was a topic of interest to some tourism scholars. For example, the journal *Current Issues in Tourism* published a special issue on Tourism and the Millennium Development Goals in 2011 (see Saarinen et al., 2011). The MDGs were succeeded by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2016. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which outlined a blueprint for sustainable development to 2030 and beyond. There are 17 SDGs linked to 169 specific targets along with indicators that are used to measure progress toward each target.

The link between tourism and sustainable development was highlighted by the United Nations General Assembly when it declared 2017 to be the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Tourism has been noted by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2017) to directly contribute to achieving the SDGs. Specific SDG targets referring to tourism include target 8.9 (by 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products), target 12.b. (develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products) and target 14.7 (by 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries).

Recent tourism literature has emphasized tourism's role in contributing to the SDGs (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Movono & Hughes, 2020; Scheyvens & Cheer, 2021; Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019). However, while there seems to be an implicit assumption that the SDGs are fundamentally good and something to aspire to, several scholars have adopted a more critical stance, noting that the underlying premise of the SDGs is predominantly framed around tourism growth and managerialism as both a means in itself and as a way of achieving the SDGs (Bianchi & de Man, 2021; Hall, 2019). Such criticism reflects wider concerns with regards to the economic growth message inherent in the SDGs (Adelman, 2017) as well as to the environmental implications of development policies based on economic growth more generally. Focusing in particular on SDG 8 – Decent

Work and Growth – Bianchi and de Man (2021) contend that the United Nation’s lead tourism organisation, the UNWTO, fails to recognise, let alone challenge, tourism’s ability to put forward a truly fair and progressive sustainable tourism agenda centred on environmental and social justice, arguing that the UNWTO remains conceptually blind to the exploitative relations of capitalist development that produce and sustain indecent work in tourism. In a similar vein and in the spirit of McCloskey’s (2015) critique regarding the failure of the MDGs, Boluk et al. (2019) proffer six themes as a critique to the SDGs to help shape the tourism industry for more sustainable, equitable and just futures. The six themes are critical tourism scholarship, gender in the sustainable development agenda, engaging with Indigenous perspectives and other paradigms, degrowth and the circular economy, governance and planning, and ethical consumption.

In the following sections, this paper now considers three areas in which David Harrison was concerned with the relationship between tourism and sustainable development.

Questioning how tourism alleviates poverty

One SDG that David was particularly interested in is examining the extent to which tourism could alleviate poverty. SDG 1 states “End poverty in all its forms everywhere”. It is a commonly held belief among development scholars and practitioners that tourism has the potential to reduce poverty (Harrison, 2008). Indeed, from the time of domestic mass tourism in the mid-nineteenth century, it was felt that tourism would, almost inevitably, reduce poverty in those regions that were fortunate enough to attract visitors (Harrison & Pratt, 2019). The emergence of mass international tourism after World War II reinforced the idea that tourism’s benefits can be extended to the developing world and, while tourism is generally seen to contribute to economic growth, there has been a concerted effort, especially among development partners, to focus the benefits on the poor (see Spenceley’s contribution to this special issue).

Pro-poor tourism (PPT) focuses on incorporating the poor into markets and is broadly defined as relating to any kind of tourism benefiting the poor. The concept also recognises that the poorest may not be touched by PPT and that the non-poor may benefit disproportionately (Meyer, 2007). Further, the focus is on family and community benefits, including clean water, sanitation, health, education, training, for example. Examples among Pacific Small Island Developing States have been noted in the literature (Scheyvens & Hughes, 2019; Scheyvens & Russell, 2012; Trau, 2012).

David’s rejoinder (Harrison, 2009) to Scheyvens (2009) corrects and challenges some of the binary thinking about pro-poor tourism that Scheyvens (2009) makes; his balanced view points out some of the nuances that need to be taken into account when critiquing pro-poor tourism. I will use two examples to demonstrate. The first example relates to the issue of value versus volume. It should be remembered that small-scale tourism results in smaller negative impacts but also smaller positive impacts too. While economic leakages might be significantly higher at an internationally branded hotel than a local-owned and operated guesthouse, the initial economic contribution at the internationally branded hotel is significantly more. So, a smaller percentage of a larger tourist expenditure may still be greater than a larger percentage of a smaller outlay. To illustrate, David creates the example of 50% (leakage 50%) of US \$250 spent at the Sheraton is economically preferable to 90% (leakage 10%) of US \$20 at a guest house (US \$125 versus US \$18). Further

intricacies revolve around how economically beneficial tourists are when comparing tourism expenditures on a per-day basis versus a per-trip basis. Even taking into account the leakage factor, some tourists may be more economically desirable on a per-day expenditure basis but if the length of stay in the destination is relatively shorter, it may be more beneficial to have tourists with lower daily expenditures but stay in the destination longer so that the overall tourism expenditure on a per-trip basis is higher (see also Hampton, 1998). Another factor to consider is the overall market size. On the surface, it might be better to have a certain tourist type that has higher per trip expenditures but if this tourist type only comprises a small percentage of the total market then, although the segment might be worth growing, the high volume of other segments of tourists may mean the lower per trip spending tourists are more “valuable” if viewed from this more macro perspective. The point is that how calculations are done, what is included and excluded, and what is the ultimate objective in assessing the economic impacts of tourism are important considerations. The issues come down to empirics and here David recommends more research to be undertaken in a variety of contexts.

Second, in my chapter with David on tourism and poverty (Harrison & Pratt, 2019), the discussion moves beyond mere definitions and measurement of whether tourism can contribute to poverty alleviation to outlining the transmission mechanisms of how tourism can alleviate poverty. That chapter outlines five processes: coincidental poverty alleviation, supplementary poverty alleviation, policy-focused poverty alleviation, corporate social responsibility/strategic alleviation, and culturally situated alleviation.

First, coincidental poverty alleviation occurs serendipitously in the natural course of the business of tourism. Through the normal operation of tourism businesses, such as hotels and restaurants, income and employment are generated, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation in the destination. Second, supplementary poverty alleviation occurs through the tourism supply chain whereby community-operated or civil society organisations operate tourism businesses and leverage their association with formal tourism enterprises. These ancillary tourism products and services may include small-scale tour operators and entrepreneurs offering tour guiding, for example. Third, policy-focused poverty alleviation are initiatives, often designed and funded by governments, NGOs, or international aid agencies. These initiatives tend to be small-scale, community-based tourism enterprises that hope to capacity-build and/or provide initial capital to start the operations. These have tended to be unsuccessful in alleviating poverty and often fail once the initial support ceases (Harrison, 2008).

Fourth, corporate social responsibility/strategic poverty alleviation occurs when companies contribute to the wider community in an ethical manner. By contributing to the wider society through environmental, health or education initiatives, companies build goodwill and raise the quality of life for their community partners. These philanthropic transfers from tourism businesses to local communities can help alleviate poverty and cases in the Pacific have been well-documented (Harrison & Prasad, 2013; Hughes & Scheyvens, 2018; Scheyvens & Hughes, 2015). The extent to which CSR initiatives can contribute to poverty alleviation has, however, been questioned owing to claims of greenwashing and ad-hocism. And finally, culturally situated poverty alleviation is undertaken by tourism enterprises that may be defined as quasi-capitalistic. Their aim is not to necessarily make a profit but to meet daily and/or traditional financial

obligations. These enterprises might be run to achieve a specific goal, such as raising funds for children's education or special occasions such as a wedding or funeral. These operations tend to be small-scale, community-owned, and (often) indigenously owned. Numerous examples from the Pacific are mentioned in the literature (Gibson, 2015; Movono et al., 2015).

Outlining these different mechanisms through which tourism can alleviate poverty reveals a granular approach. This will enable pro-poor initiatives to be categorised and analyzed and, if so desired, actions and policies undertaken. In sum, tourism certainly has the potential to alleviate poverty and contribute to development. However, many of the examples of pro-poor tourism cited in the literature tend to be linked to small-scale community-based (and often indigenous) tourism. This underlines the fact that traditionally there tends to be binary thinking between small-scale community-based indigenous tourism being "good" and mass tourism being "bad", although more recent research tends to be more nuanced and more conceptually well-defined and much less framed in relation to such dichotomies. This is something David Harrison's work foreshadowed by providing a more balanced perspective by noting all forms of tourism can potentially alleviate poverty.

Questioning the relative merits of small-scale tourism

Another area in which David has made an important but nuanced contribution to the sustainable tourism development debate is to question the maxim that small is better and even if it might be "better", however that is defined. Typically, sustainable tourism at the destination level tends to be associated with smaller-scale projects and developments, but is it realistic that small-scale can be the norm in an era of high mobility within a capitalist and global world? David challenges the notion that small (tourism) is beautiful (Harrison, 2011), raising the following points. First, small is relative; what is small in one context may be large in another, so it is too simplistic to simply refer to "small". Second, small may not be more efficient or better for the economy. While most tourism enterprises are small to medium in size (Jones et al., 2004), and there are indeed many examples of successful businesses, especially in the early stages of development, there is other evidence to suggest that small tourism business owners in the Pacific lack the financial, social and cultural capital to achieve long term success (Harrison, 2001). Similarly, there is also evidence that donor-funded projects have difficulty achieving long-term success, even when the focus is on community participation and environmental conservation (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). Third, small tourism enterprises can look very different from each other. An eight-bed backpackers' lodge can accommodate the same number of guests as a four-villa foreign-owned boutique resort, but the difference in room rates can be of the order of magnitude of 10 or more. And even leaving aside the economic differences, the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of these two types of small tourism businesses can be very different.

Fourth, if small is beautiful, how is beautiful in the tourism context defined? For tourism employees, wage rates and working conditions may be poor regardless of the size of the accommodation establishment (Canada, 2020; The Guardian, 2021). Fifth, while the impact of large-scale tourism establishments will be larger than small-scale tourism, large-scale tourism establishments may be able to take advantage of economies of

scale and have the funds to offset some of the negative impacts. They are also able to invest in technologies to counter some of the negative effects of large-scale tourism. David provides an insightful example to make the case (Harrison, 2011). While, no doubt, a 300-room resort will contribute more to environmental damage compared to a 10-room lodge, that comparison is disingenuous. A more appropriate comparison would be to compare the aforementioned 300-room resort with 30 10-room lodges. Assessing the environmental costs of one 300-room resort with 30 10-room lodges is comparing like with like. Harrison suggests the 300-room resort may be able to leverage its technological know-how and economies of scale to be more environmentally friendly. Sixth, just as small does not necessarily equal beautiful, large does not necessarily mean ugly. Small-scale resorts are not shielded from onerous or poor owners/managers. And finally, even if we hold the idea that small-scale tourism is intrinsically better or more beautiful, from simple observation, some tourists prefer small-scale tourism operations and other tourists prefer large resort-style accommodation. In fact, David and I used to take our University of the South Pacific students on field trips to these large internationally branded resorts in Fiji to witness just this. David, as he admitted himself, preferred peace and quiet while on holidays, but he was prepared to sacrifice this for the opportunity to see loud and noisy tourists in action.

In the context of tourism in Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICT), there is abundant literature on how small-scale tourism is contributing to (sustainable) tourism development. Many of the examples cited in the literature refer to the same case studies. However, this may give a misleading picture of how sustainable tourism in PICTs is and the degree to which it can contribute to sustainable tourism development. For example, Bricker (2001) describes in detail the development of the white-water rafting operations, Rivers Fiji, in the rural highlands of Fiji, a case study that has more recently been rehashed by other scholars (Movono & Hughes, 2020; Scheyvens et al., 2021). Similarly, the Fijian village of Vatuolalai in the tourist-region of the Coral Coast has been used excessively to outline both the positive and negative impacts of tourism on local communities (Movono, 2017; Movono & Becken, 2018; Movono & Dahles, 2017; Movono et al., 2018; Movono et al., 2015; Pratt et al., 2016; Trupp et al., 2021). Yet, these are just two specific case studies; they are special cases rather than being representative of tourism's broader ability to contribute to sustainable tourism development in the Pacific: an exemplar rather than the status quo. It should also be noted that, building on his scepticism of the small is beautiful rhetoric, David turned his attention to the role of mass tourism in development.

Questioning the distinction between “developed” and “developing” in a globalised world

The issue of the advantages of small-scale versus large-scale tourism link to a related theme of David's work which ties back to his musings on development theory, namely, how modern tourism operates in a globalised world. Despite much rhetoric with supporting examples of how small-scale (and often indigenous) tourism can contribute to the development and help meet the SDGs, David provides several realistic propositions which restate the dominance of mass tourism in an interconnected globalised world

(Harrison, 2015). First, he argued that “capitalism and international tourism will continue for the foreseeable future” (Harrison, 2015, p. 66); at the time of writing, even with the continuing pandemic, there is evidence of international tourism re-starting in most countries at the end of 2021 and into 2022. Moreover, despite much revisioning by tourism scholars (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Lew et al., 2020), the tourism industry is hoping to return to pre-COVID-19 levels as quickly as possible. With flights being the main mode of transportation, especially for long-haul destinations, it will be back to business as usual (at least in the shorter term, notwithstanding emerging policies to address climate change). David’s observation that tourism is going to be promoted through some form or another of capitalism is reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping’s famous comment: “No matter if it is a white cat or a black cat; as long as it can catch mice, it is a good cat”.

David also opined that “large-scale tourism will continue to be the norm”. It is somewhat surprising that less attention has been paid to better understanding mass tourism in recent years, although David and colleagues sought to address this issue (Harrison & Sharpley, 2017). It is time that both tourism scholarship and industry practitioners focused on improving the sustainability of all types of tourism (Weaver, 2012). Another proposition that David offered was that “alternative tourism is normally linked to and often dependent on mass tourism and will never replace it” (Harrison, 2015, p. 68), noting that most alternative tourism is as capitalistic as mass tourism. Further, tourists can undertake mass tourism, such as sun, sea, and sand activities on some days of their trip but can also participate in alternative tourism activities, such as taking a hike or visiting a village, on other days of their trip. Mass tourism and alternative tourism are not mutually exclusive.

Lastly, he recognises that “international tourism is a cross-border activity linking individuals and institutions in developed and developing societies and needs to be conceptualised as operating in an international and systemic way” (Harrison, 2015: 69). This systems approach highlights the need to consider tourism within the external environment, which takes into account international power relations, transnational corporations, the role of the State, and the characteristics of geography, society and the economy in its historical context. Tourism impacts on globalisation and is impacted upon by globalisation (Tolkach & Pratt, 2021).

Conclusion

Overall, David Harrison concludes that tourism does contribute development, especially in PICTs. He would also argue that trying to achieve sustainability is a worthy goal but, at the same time, he would also question whether small scale tourism is inherently better than mass tourism and affirm that all types of tourism can contribute to poverty alleviation and that we live in a globalised world where the actions of different actors, both closely associated with tourism or quite distant from tourism, have important ramifications for tourism, regardless of whether they are from the “developed” or “developing” world.

David’s contributions in these areas are, then, a timely reminder to think critically about the nature of tourism and, in particular, about the notion of sustainable tourism development. As he summarises:

finally, perhaps the greatest challenge is to ensure that tourism is a passport to development. More than increasing tourist numbers (a priority too little questioned) and GDP, governments of PICTs need to ensure economic benefits from tourism are used for progressing the common good, and not only that of an economic elite. That would certainly give residents of destination areas something to smile about. (Harrison & Pratt, 2015, p. 17)

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