

## **‘SPIRITUALITY IN PRACTICE’ IN SUSTAINABILITY TOURISM RESEARCH**

### **Abstract**

A more critical and engaging tourism sustainability research is needed, and this note argues that a valuable contribution can come from the scholars’ engagement with their spirituality. The main argument is that spirituality and sustainability are strictly interrelated, and such link should be an integral part of the methodology of studies about sustainability and tourism. Elaborating on the concept of reflexivity, this note coins the expression ‘spirituality in practice’, which is explained using an example based on the author’s experience. This note challenges tourism scholars to reflect on and make explicit how their position in terms of spirituality influences their choices regarding sustainability research.

Keywords: methodology, reflexivity, sustainability, spirituality, tourism

### **Introduction**

A shift towards sustainability in tourism is urgently needed, but solutions are difficult to find and implement (Jovicic, 2018; Sharpley, 2020). Some studies suggest that researchers engaging with sustainability and tourism should strive to be more critical and practical because limitations in critical and practical thinking can lead to a loss of enthusiasm for the sustainability concept (Budeanu et al., 2016; Boluk et al., 2019). The risk of apathy towards sustainability leads to a certain resignation that is irreconcilable with the significant efforts required to make radical changes for sustainability. These considerations highlight an opportunity to explore alternative ways of approaching sustainability in tourism research.

This note proposes to approach sustainability in tourism research by integrating spirituality in the researchers’ reflexivity process (i.e. the process of reflecting on how the self influences the knowledge processes of doing research). Spirituality embraces a view of humans as individuals connected to all other beings in a relationship that transcends time, space and bodily senses (Nandram/Borden, 2010), and involves an inner tension in the search for values and meanings (Sheldrake, 2017). An increasing number of scholars are investigating the link between spirituality and sustainability (e.g. Carroll, 2012; Zsolnai, 2015; Dhiman/Marques, 2016). Still, the potential effects of such link on research practices has received scant attention, and only few studies within the sustainable science literature (e.g., Ives et al., 2020) comment on it.

This note argues for the opportunity for tourism scholars investigating sustainability to engage with their own spirituality as part of their commitment to research quality in terms of reflexivity (Ateljevic et al., 2005; Xi et al., 2013). Although the researchers’ spiritual worldview can determine what kind of questions are asked, and what theories and methodologies are employed, spirituality has a marginalised position in academia, which tends to prefer the conventional Western understanding of knowledge production (Shahjahan, 2005). Ignoring or dismissing the role of spirituality in sustainability research practice is a missed opportunity for a more inclusive and potentially novel research that can resist the shortcomings of apathy and resignation.

The link between spirituality and sustainability is explained in the next section. Then, the extent and the way spirituality is discussed in the tourism literature, in particular with

regard to sustainability, is presented and commented on in relation to the opportunity to refer such concept to the researchers' reflexivity process. The concept of 'spirituality in practice' is then introduced, and exemplified referring to the author's own experience. This note closes with an invitation directed to tourism scholars researching sustainability.

### **The link between spirituality and sustainability**

The core of spirituality aligns with sustainability thinking through the concepts of transcendence, interconnectedness and oneness (Dhiman/Marques, 2016). Transcendence of place and time relates to the sustainability dimensions of equity and inter-/intra-generational justice, which is associated with the spiritual aspects of interconnectedness and oneness, highlighting the human capacity to 'see the others', connect with them and overcome egoism. The 'others' include nature; from a spiritual perspective, the natural and human worlds merge in a symbiosis that relates well to the vision of strong sustainability.

Spirituality is sometimes associated with religion but, differently from the latter, spirituality does not imply an institutionalised system of beliefs; it rejects dogma and is based on a reflection on the human experience and the connection with all beings (Zsolnai, 2015). It implies an understanding of human life characterised by introspection and openness to change—two factors that are crucial for the deep learning usually associated with sustainability (Warburton, 2003). Critical thinking is at the heart of spirituality conceived as an endeavour to acquire and live by a vision of transcendence, interconnectedness and oneness (Gary, 2006). Such a vision, as aforementioned, aligns with sustainability and is therefore suitable for approaching sustainability in a critical way.

The spiritual purpose of conducting a meaningful life that goes beyond self-interest relates to ethics, which explores the nature of good and, in particular, to virtues ethics, which focuses on moral identity and the character traits for a 'good life' in harmony with others (Roberts/Crossman, 2018). However, ethics lacks something that spirituality has: the tremendous strength of a narrative about a non-materialistic dimension of life that is worth exploring, as it is in this dimension that we can fully realise ourselves (Spohn, 1997). As argued in an increasing number of studies about education (e.g. Coates, 2012; Molthan-Hill et al., 2020) and sustainable development (e.g. Luks, 2014; Lowery et al., 2020), narratives are essential for a shift towards sustainability. Typically, narratives create a link between values and actions, especially in relation to complex situations such as sustainable shifts, and include main characters often depicted as agents of internal or/and external change (Fisher, 1987; Wall et al., 2019). More than norms and rules about what is right and what is wrong, spiritual narratives can move people to act: they can be "the tools of hope" (Bathurst, 2017, p. 87) to face possible doubts and challenges about sustainable futures. Thus, more than ethics, spirituality is the foundation for an exceptionally engaging approach to sustainability (Zsolnai, 2015).

### **Spirituality in tourism**

Numerous studies investigate spirituality in tourism with reference to spiritual tourism experiences (e.g. Sharpley, 2009, 2016; Wilson et al., 2013; Cheer et al., 2017; Roknodin Eftekhari et al., 2018). Some studies investigate other themes related to spirituality, such as the spirituality of tourism entrepreneurs (e.g. Fonneland, 2013) and the spiritual practices of employees and leaders (e.g. Milliman et al., 2018; Usman et al., 2021). Few studies explore the link between spirituality and sustainability (e.g. Dwyer, 2016; Kasim, 2016; Mat Som, 2019). The latter theme is central to some articles in the *International Journal of Tourism and Spirituality*, founded after the first international conference on tourism and spirituality in 2016. Among these articles, particularly valuable is the study by Dwyer (2016). Such study discusses the necessity of a change in the mindset of the stakeholders involved in sustainable

tourism. Interestingly, the author specifies that such a necessity concerns also tourism researchers.

In the broader tourism literature, the relevance of spirituality to sustainability is scarcely investigated, and usually with regard to specific managerial aspects, for example hotel employees' wellbeing (e.g. Ghaedi et al., 2020) and pro-environmental behaviours (e.g. Rezapouraghdam et al., 2018). The potential of adopting a spiritual perspective on tourism research in a more holistic way and as a means to understand sustainability deeply and critically has received little attention from scholars. Two tourism studies stand out in the consideration of spirituality as a particularly fruitful approach to sustainability. Rahmawati and colleagues (2019) investigate corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Bali's tourism system, and discuss spirituality as a powerful framework for sustainability-related actions at different levels. The second study highlighting the potential of spirituality for sustainability in tourism is by Barkathunnisha and colleagues (2017). These authors argue for a spirituality-based educational philosophy as a valuable pedagogical approach for dealing with global sustainability-related challenges. They state that spiritual engagement is a crucial channel for creating the knowledge and constructing relevant meanings for sustainability.

Some observations presented in the two aforementioned studies cause some concern about tourism academia in general and in relation to how it frames and discusses sustainability challenges. Rahmawati and colleagues (2019) observe that the CSR literature is dominated by Western philosophies. In addition to being a clear sign of the unbalanced representation of different voices in academia, this situation implies the exclusion of the contributions to sustainability by Eastern philosophies that, typically, reject human mastery over nature and highlight the pursuit of harmony in daily life to a greater extent than do Western philosophies. With regard to the call by Barkathunnisha and colleagues (2017) about including spirituality in tourism education, the concern is about the necessity of focusing on today's academics and not only on the possibility to include spirituality in the formation of future practitioners and scholars. In addition to consider the inclusion of spirituality in their practice as teachers and tutors, academics should look inward and reflect on their own attitude towards spirituality, their spiritual position and how this influences the way they understand sustainability.

To sum up, while there are numerous tourism studies concerning spiritual experiences, there are some limitations in the investigation of the link between spirituality and sustainability. One limitation is that when spirituality is related to sustainability, this is done mainly in relation to specific aspects, such as employees' well-being and behaviours. Another limitation is that the potential of spirituality in terms of sustainability is discussed in relation to tourism operators and students, while tourism scholars seem to resist engaging in the investigation of their own spirituality and how this influences their understanding of sustainability. This second limitation is particularly severe. The scholars' lack of discussion about the link between their spirituality and the way they study sustainability can compromise how sustainable challenges are framed and discussed. This note addresses such gap concerning the limitation of spirituality considerations to specific cases and with reference to tourists, operators and students, but not to scholars.

Responding to the call to move towards the 'disruption and creation of new ways of doing tourism research' (Ivanova et al., 2020: 5) and expanding on the suggestion by Dwyer (2016) about the necessity of more spiritual mindset, the next section focuses on spirituality awareness and relates such process to reflexivity. Reflexivity can be described as the process through which 'researchers turn a critical gaze upon themselves' (Finlay, 2003: 3). Social scientists, especially those employing qualitative methodologies, engage with reflexivity when researching and describing the methodology of their work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Although reflexivity is encouraged and linked by some scholars to radical changes for

personal and wider transformations (Maxey, 1999; Lumsden, 2019), research practices vary considerably. This is also the case of tourism studies (Jamal & Everett, 2004; Ateljevic et al., 2005), in which some aspects, among which this note includes the scholars’ spirituality, seem to be perceived as too private to be shared publicly (Hall, 2004; Crossley, 2020).

**‘Spirituality in practice’: the inclusion of spirituality in reflexivity**

This note proposes the concept of ‘spirituality in practice’ to emphasise the importance of reflexivity in terms of spirituality in sustainability research in tourism. Some sustainability scholars consider reflexivity as a valuable opportunity for the necessary questioning of the values, background assumptions and normative orientations shaping sustainability research (Popa et al., 2015; Knaggård et al., 2018; Susur/Karakaya, 2021). In the approach to science advocated by these scholars, reflexivity is a key feature of the analysis of wicked problems as those typical of sustainability issues (Popa et al., 2015; Susur/Karakaya, 2021). Paraphrasing Guillemin and Gillam (2004) who discuss reflexivity in terms of ethics and use the expression ‘ethics in practice’, this note coins the expression ‘spirituality in practice’ to indicate the scholars’ conscious and explicit confrontation with their spirituality and the day-to-day spiritual issues that arise in the conduct of research. To illustrate the ‘spirituality in practice’ concept and its relevance to sustainability, in particular the link between the spirituality awareness process of the researchers and their choices in terms of framing and discussing sustainability, an example based on the author’s own experience is presented in Figure 1.

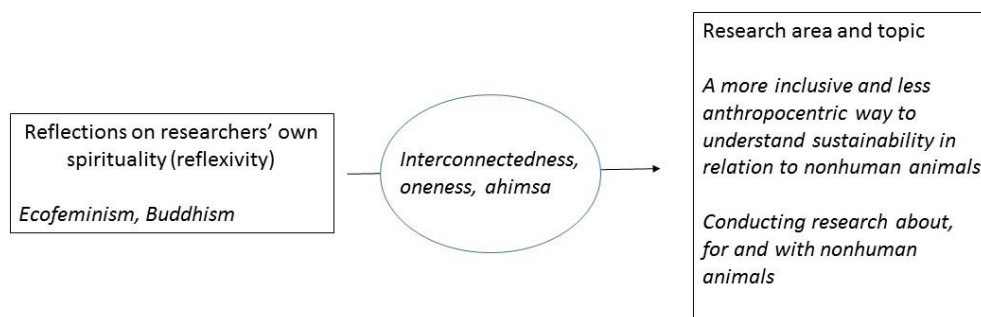


Figure 1. ‘Spirituality in practice’: making explicit the author’s spirituality and linking it to her research choices.

The text in the left part of the figure indicates the researcher’s spiritual position. This is possibly—but not necessarily—linked to religion and ethics. In this specific case, Buddhism and Ecofeminism are the major influences on the author’s spiritual position. From this position, more precisely from the concepts of interconnectedness, oneness and *ahimsa* (nonviolence), derives the author’s choice of a research area, namely a more inclusive and less anthropocentric way to understand sustainability in relation to nonhuman animals (Bertella, 2019). To exemplify further, figure 1 shows a topic within such an area. This concerns the methodology to apply when conducting research about, for and with animals

(Bertella, IN PRESS). Such topic is relevant to the creation of knowledge for a type of sustainability that is less anthropocentric. The studies conducted within such area and topic show how the author's spiritual position has clear consequences on her way to frame and discuss sustainability. The link between the spiritual values of interconnectedness, oneness and *ahimsa* and the reflections presented in these studies is evident.

While the author engaged in a process of reflexivity in terms of 'spirituality in practice' when planning and conducting the aforementioned studies, these reflections were made explicit to the readers only partially and never referring to spirituality. This is due to the author's decision to follow the mainstream trend to consider such issues as private (Hall, 2004; Crossley, 2020), and to the lack of any requirement by the editors and reviewers for such a type of reflexivity. It is the author's experience that while scholars researching animal ethics in tourism are often required to make their ethical position explicit, this is not the case for scholars writing about sustainability. This can be explained by a relatively shared recognition that conflictual positions about animal ethics exist, and by the lack of a similar recognition in relation to sustainability and, in particular, its link to spirituality. When reporting their understanding of sustainability, most scholars, included the author of this note, tend to define such concept not only without referring to any spiritual value, but also adhering to a specific view that is the one deriving from the Brundtland commission and, more recently, to the UN sustainable development goals (Telfer, 2012). This can be related to the criticism expressed by some scholars about the existence of dominant ideologies in the tourism academia and the consequent barriers to the emergence of alternative views (Ateljevic et al., 2005).

The aforementioned dominant view on sustainability can have some limitations, and 'spirituality in practice' is a valuable contribution to explore possible alternative views. The dominant understanding of sustainability can lead to some considerable limitations, as noted by some tourism scholar with regard to the impellent needs deriving from the climate change crisis as well as global socio-political challenges (Macbeth, 2005; Gren/Huijbens, 2014). The problematic aspect is that such understanding perpetuates the instrumental view of nature as capital, and is likely to lead to the reproduction of the fallacy of modernity, which is the belief in the possibility to combine economic growth on a finite planet with social justice and environmental protection (Adelman, 2018). Integrating spirituality in the scholars' reflexivity process can contribute to overcome these limitations. It can be reasonably assumed that the inclusion of the core elements of spirituality, which are transcendence, interconnectedness and oneness (Dhiman/Marques, 2016), can contribute to a renewed way to understand and study sustainability. In the reported example, a more inclusive and less anthropocentric understanding of sustainability was the result of such process. 'Spirituality in practice' can be the process supporting scholars in engaging more critically when doing research about sustainability and tourism.

## **Conclusion**

The starting point of this note was the important spiritual dimension to sustainability, and the consequent potentials in terms of a more critical and engaging research about sustainability and tourism. After identifying some limitations in the way spirituality enters the tourism literature, this note focused on reflexivity. The concept of 'spirituality in practice' was proposed and illustrated using the author's own experience about conducting research about a more inclusive and less anthropocentric way to understand sustainability. This example illustrated how spirituality can be at the roots of our engagement in specific sustainability related research areas and topics, and highlighted how conformity can act as a powerful barrier to the reflexivity process that is necessary for innovative, critical and trustworthy research.

The major contribution of this note is the discussion and exemplification of the link between spirituality and sustainability, and the related effect on research practices. Future studies are needed to explore and discuss the inclusion of spirituality considerations in sustainable tourism research, and valuable insights can come from sustainability science studies discussing knowledge production in terms of transformations.

To conclude, this note invites scholars to reflect on and make explicit the link between their spirituality and their research choices to develop a more critical and engaging scholarship. More in general, this note points to the opportunity to dare to challenge established methodological practices and, importantly, to re-think about what is desirable in tourism research and to what extent diversity of perspectives is encouraged and promoted.

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