



SUSTAINABILITY OR STAGNATION? Limits on development in tourist destinations

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ABSTRACT: Two concepts have featured heavily in academic writing on tourist destinations over the past three decades, one relating to the tourism area life cycle (TALC) and the other relating to sustainable development (SD). It is argued here that these concepts have many features in common, and that the idea of stability in the development process of a destination is dependent on that destination living within its limits, i.e. not exceeding its tourist carrying capacity. In the TALC this desired state equates to the stage of “stagnation” and for sustainable development, it represents a state of sustainability. The paper reviews the issue of implementation in the context of these concepts using two examples to illustrate how a more sustainable form of tourism might be achieved when effective control over the development and operation of tourism is implemented effectively. **Keywords:** tourism area life cycle, sustainable development, tourist carrying capacity, stagnation, sustainability.

RESUMEN: Dos conceptos han aparecido mucho en la producción académica sobre los destinos turísticos en las últimas tres décadas, uno relacionado con el ciclo de vida de la zona turística (TALC) y el otro relacionado con el desarrollo sostenible (DS). Aquí se argumenta que estos conceptos tienen muchas características en común, y que la idea de la estabilidad en el proceso de desarrollo de un destino depende de la vivencia del destino dentro de sus límites, es decir, no superior a su capacidad de carga turística. En el TALC este estado deseado es igual a la etapa de “estancamiento” y para el desarrollo sostenible, representa un estado de la sostenibilidad. En este estudio se examina la cuestión de la aplicación en el contexto de estos conceptos con dos ejemplos para ilustrar cómo una forma más sostenible de turismo se puede lograr cuando el control efectivo sobre el desarrollo y operación del turismo sea implementado con eficacia. **Palabras clave:** ciclo de vida de la zona turística, desarrollo sostenible, capacidad de carga turística, estancamiento, sostenibilidad.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Sustainable Development and the Tourism Area Life Cycle model both stress the importance of limits along with a third concept, carrying capacity, and argue that the application of limits are of critical importance if a desired state of successful operation is to be achieved (Martin & Uysal, 1990). However, few destinations have been able to maintain such a state over a very long period of time and it is argued in the paper that one of the key reasons for this

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is the absence of control (over tourist numbers, development and the nature of tourism amongst other factors) in most destinations, resulting in a failure to identify limits and, even when these may have been identified, a failure to adhere to such limits. Without effective control and all that implies, implementation, in whatever form (Hall, 2009) of what may be viewed by some stakeholders as negative or restrictive policies, is unlikely to occur. Despite the outpouring of writing on sustainable tourism (including a journal, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, on the topic) and the TALC (Legiewski, 2006), relatively little has been achieved on a lasting basis in terms of the operation, management, and development of tourism other than in the case of individual facilities. While this might match the “think globally, act locally” philosophy, in reality it does little to ensure that tourism development in destinations and regions is in line with sustainable development principles (WCED, 1987) or avoids the “decline” phase of the TALC model (Butler, 1980). The major issue is with implementation, or more correctly, general non-implementation of policy on the ground, and it is argued here that the principal reason for that is the lack of control over tourism and its associated development and operation in destination areas. Of the two examples briefly discussed in this paper, one reviews the development of tourism in an island group, while the other reviews the operation of a specific set of facilities in a destination community. In both cases it is argued that the successful implementation of *de facto* sustainable development policies has been dependent upon the existence of control mechanisms operated by the agencies responsible for the development and operation of tourism in the respective examples. The existence of control mechanisms alone does not guarantee that sustainable principles will be followed, such mechanisms have to be put into practice and adhered to if long term sustainability is to be achieved.

Both of the concepts referred to above first appeared in published form more than two decades ago, the TALC in 1980 (Butler, 1980) and Sustainable Development in 1987 (WCED, 1987). Whether the age of these concepts and the fact that they are still quoted and applied mean that they are of enduring applicability or that the tourism research community has run out of new ideas is perhaps subject to debate. If for the purposes of this discussion we accept the former belief, then it behoves us to ask why such concepts are still meaningful. Both ideas have been debated at length in the academic literature (e.g., Butler, 2006a, 2006b; Gossling, Hall, & Weaver 2009; Mowforth & Munt, 1998; Wahab & Pigram, 1997) and the concept of sustainable development in particular has received widespread public and political support. Both concepts share two other features in common, namely, ineffective application and implementation. Despite wide-

spread visibility in the academic literature and at least some mention among planning agencies, the TALC and its implications have been ignored rather than being applied in many tourist destinations around the world. The model has tended to receive considerable attention when visitor numbers (and spend) stagnate or decline, with a frequent urgency then to “rejuvenate” the respective destinations, often, ironically perhaps, claiming increased sustainability in the process, as well as “moving upmarket”, terms to strike depression into any thinking tourism academic.

Sustainable development was inevitably applied to tourism; it is, after all, too “good” a concept to be ignored as it allows politicians, operators, developers and planners at all scales to gain favourable publicity while not actually doing anything of real value and only very rarely actually engaging in anything sustainable beyond a little superficial “greening” of some locations. In many cases, the concept has been used as an excuse to allow additional development, often requiring greater energy consumption, both in travel to, and on site by tourists to utilize the facilities. In the case of upmarket developments, greater energy use per capita often results, rather than energy savings as the upmarket clientele rather prefer luxury to basic necessities, even if the former is wrapped up as the latter. There are differing perceptions about the ‘necessity’ of butler service, air conditioning and the availability of imported alcoholic products, for example.

This is not to say that more sustainable facilities and destinations have not been developed, but, as Wheeler (2009) has argued when applied to ‘responsible’ tourism, to talk of sustainable tourism but to ignore the travel component is rather pointless (except from the marketing and “greenwash” points of view). There are very few examples of a successful long term application of sustainable tourism principles at a destination level, perhaps because most destinations cannot be reached by their tourism customers without significant consumption of energy which makes the whole process somewhat self-defeating. There are many examples of successful short term applications of sustainable development principles at a facility level, however, just as there are examples of successful application of the principles of the TALC at such a level also. This latter statement should not be taken to mean that this writer regards the TALC and Sustainable Development as on a par in terms of application and importance. This would be egotism taken to a ridiculous level, the TALC is an academic model meant to be applied to destinations, and has had relatively little political application. Sustainable Development is a global concept, adopted to various degrees nationally, internationally and locally. This comparison is being made for an academic readership but having made that point, it is argued that there are elements of similarity between the two concepts.

LIMITS AND CAPACITY

Both concepts have at their heart a belief in limits. However one examines sustainable development one cannot ignore the fact that it is basically a call to live and operate within limits, generally but not exclusively environmental ones, a principle harking back to the first use of the term conservation in the nineteenth century by the Raj in India relating to forest preserves, and continued in the idea of the “wise use of resources” of the Roosevelt era in North America early in the twentieth century (Shephard, 1967). A similar call was made in the second half of the last century by Meadows et al (1970) in their report for the Club of Rome, echoing the rationale in the short but brilliant essay by Hardin in *Science* in 1968 and the eloquent volume by McHarg (1969), *Design with Nature*, a year later (interestingly enough now republished by Wiley in their Sustainable Design series). The TALC pales by comparison with these writings but pursued a similar theme, namely that without appropriate intervention, over use and over development, i.e. exceeding the “natural limits” of a destination, would ultimately lead to the destruction or at least decline in appeal of that destination, echoing in turn the thoughts of Plog (1973) and Christaller (1963).

To accept the principle of limits does not imply that such limits are fixed, although with that admission there is always the danger of continuous flexibility allowing uncontrolled expansion, a point which this writer has raised (1996) in the context of management approaches such as the Limits of Acceptable Change (Stankey et al., 1985) where the elements Limits, Acceptable, and Change are all subject to modification as human values vary over time, normally moving consistently in favour of continued and additional development. It is necessary therefore, to consider whether we are to take limits seriously as a concept, and if so, how they might be applied successfully. Several questions arise here that would need to be resolved. Limits on what? Whose limits? Whose values? How would limits be applied? In this paper the discussion will focus on the last of these points, partly because it is unlikely that any audience would agree on the second and third items, even if there was acceptance of the first, namely what elements might be limited. Let us therefore assume (as economists do that all the time) that the idea of limits is acceptable and examine briefly how a destination can take steps to ensure that it controls its own destiny and is able to impose controls, limits and regulations on development.

APPLICATION

Hardin (1968) summarized that the true tragedy of the commons (which is what we face in many tourist destinations if sustainable principles are not adopted at some point) was the inevitability of the ruina-

tion of the commons. He made the point that without responsibility there could be no solution, and one may take this a little further and note that without control there can be little chance of responsibility being assigned, and therefore little chance of achieving sustainability or avoiding allowing development to a level that leads to decline in the case of TALC. Surprisingly few researchers (e.g., Healy, 1994) have echoed Hardin's arguments in the context of tourism "commons". The similarities between the TALC and the concept of sustainability have been made elsewhere (Butler, 2004) and do not need to be repeated beyond pointing out that both concepts call for stabilization or cessation of growth when limits (carrying capacity) are reached. In the case of the TALC, 'stagnation' suggested cessation, at least in the rate of growth if not in growth itself, an appropriate state of affairs if such the level of development reached did not exceed the carrying capacity of the destination? (The term 'stagnation' was perhaps an unfortunate word to use because it undoubtedly has negative implications to most destinations and development oriented agencies, in hindsight it is likely that 'stability' would have been much more acceptable and viewed more positively). The similarity of the stage of 'stagnation' to a state of sustainability is very clear. Continued slight growth may be appropriate if carrying capacity can be increased in an acceptable manner and degree to match demands being made on resources (human, ecological and physical) in the destination. This begs the question, who would identify the appropriate level(s) and ensure it/they was/were not exceeded? The obvious answer is "those in charge" (of development, of growth, of industry etc.) The obvious problem with that view is that in many cases there is no-one in charge except a national government, and most national governments are generally in favour of continued and continuous growth in tourism because of the foreign exchange benefits. Of course at the global scale there is clearly no-one in charge of anything.

In the case of tourism of course, things are inevitably messy. Most national governments think of tourism as little else but a money making concern. If their economy is small, the chances are that tourism will be relatively important and have its own minister (as in the Caribbean states for example), while if the economy is large, tourism will tend to be disregarded, even when it is of substantial absolute value, and is often subsumed in another ministry (as in the UK, where tourism is a 'lost' element in the larger unit of Culture, Media and Sport, and in Canada and the USA where there are no ministries of tourism). At the global scale, despite the efforts of UNWTO and WTTC to demonstrate with somewhat vague and often absurd statistics that tourism is the largest item in world trade and therefore pre-eminently economically important, there is no-one in charge of tourism. Many

elements can influence tourism including major airlines, banks, governments and terrorists, some can stop it completely, at least for a while in specific locations, but none of the above can be said to be able to control or manage it. The generally misnamed Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), a fanciful term for marketing and/or promotional agencies for the most part, rarely if ever manage anything beyond promotion, certainly not an actual destination. Thus overall development is rarely examined until a crisis (decline?) occurs, as most control is exercised over individual developments, and then often in response to what are often conflicting resident opinions based on anticipated impacts and what are often inflated promises of developers of income and employment generation. In most cases, development wins, perhaps appropriately in some situations, but such decisions are rarely taken with the complete context and understanding of all of the implications of the decision in the context of the TALC and sustainable development principles in the destination involved.

In one of the most disappointing exceptions to this pattern, the municipality of Calvia, in Mallorca, did almost all of the “right” things in its effort to apply sustainable development principles, partly through its “Eco tax” and the subsequent expenditure of the funds raised (Dodds, 2007). That this promising exercise failed after a depressingly short period is due primarily to the municipality not being able to persuade those really in charge (the national Spanish government) to apply the tax in the most appropriate manner to ensure that it was paid by all visitors to Mallorca. The fundamental and ultimately fatal problem was in the implementation or rather only partial implementation, which allowed opponents, especially large hotel operators, to defeat the application of the tax at the next local election by persuading the local population to vote out the existing council members and elect a new council which abolished the tax. A key lesson from this unfortunate example is that without full control over the whole process, the application of sustainable development principles is unlikely to succeed even in the short term, let alone over the long term that is inherent in the concept.

CONTROL

Returning to the TALC, the essential assumption (and perhaps weakness) in that model was the unstated assumption that there was an agency that could manage the resources of the destination and thus control and direct tourism development (and promotion). This perhaps was wishful thinking, but not entirely so. There are some destinations which appear to be able to maintain their appeal to tourists over the long term and provide both an acceptable quality of life for residents and the desired quality of experience for visitors. Some places (e.g., St

Moritz, Gstaad) appear to have achieved this through price and exclusivity, while others (e.g., Las Vegas) appear to achieve it through continuous redevelopment and renewal of appeal, albeit in a non-sustainable manner, at least in the case of Las Vegas, where control is mostly replaced by a *laissez-faire* approach to development. At the facility level the Disney operations provide a further example of the importance of overall control, where continued success, at least in their American heartland (California and Florida), has been achieved through careful management and control of operations and developments.

Control at the individual destination level is difficult to achieve, whether in the case of tourism or development generally, since many destinations are at the mercy of external elements, both private and public (Weaver & Oppermann, 2000), which can control the flow of tourists and ultimately development to those destinations. Central governments can control the arrival of tourists at the national level by policies relating to such features as visas, or through currency controls, although, with a few exceptions (e.g., North Korea) most are keen for additional tourist numbers rather than trying to reduce numbers. Even New Zealand, which has successfully promoted itself as a green sustainable and “pure” destination, wishes to increase international tourist numbers significantly in the current decade, apparently without regard for the sustainability or otherwise of such an increase (personal communication, 2010). Private corporations can control access to destinations by controlling transport networks, accommodation provision and even energy and utility provision, increasing or decreasing services and thus visitor numbers as they wish. Despite this, some locations have succeeded in securing a measure of control over their own destinies and with that control, the ability to control tourism.

The first example to be reviewed is that of the Shetland Islands, lying north of the British mainland, located astride longitude 60 north. Like many small isolated island groups, Shetland for a long time was dependent on and subservient to the UK national government, a long distance away (seven hundred miles in this case), whose goals often did not match those of the islands’ population. This situation had to be accepted as a *fait accompli* and a fact of life until the discovery of offshore oil deposits in the 1970s. The subsequent demands placed on the islands by oil companies and the national government’s apparent willingness to acquiesce to almost any such demands in the national economic interest provoked a hostile reaction from the island population. The end result was a refusal by the Shetland Islands Council to accept the demands of oil and related companies and the pursuance by the Council of a specific Act of Parliament. This bill gave the Island Council specific controls over the shoreline and development approval of projects at a level that was beyond those normally pos-

sessed by small rural local governments (Butler & Nelson, 1994). This power over development proposals has enabled the Shetland Islands Council to prevent development it deemed unsuitable for, or incompatible with, the “Shetland way of life”, and thus secure what was felt to be the desired quality of life for the inhabitants. In general terms, this has meant rejection of very large scale developments (with the exception of accepting one oil terminal instead of over a dozen) and redevelopment of the main airport and ferry terminal. In the context of tourism, this policy has been aided by the relative remoteness of the islands, the high cost of access, and a somewhat harsh climate that has somewhat of a deterrent effect on beach-related tourism. Thus by being able to exert control over almost all forms of development and adhering to locally desired levels and rates of growth, the Shetland Islands Council has been able to keep tourism and other development possibilities to a scale acceptable to the vast majority of the inhabitants of the islands. That is not to say that all tourism-related or other developments have been ideal, either in nature or design, as at least two relatively new hotels bear witness, but it has enabled the local authorities to exercise “damage limitation” with respect to what were deemed inappropriate developments. (A more detailed review of tourism in the Shetland Islands and the movement towards sustainability can be found in Butler, in press a)

The second example relates to specific facilities, namely the golf courses in the town of St Andrews, also in Scotland. St Andrews is universally known as the “Home of Golf”, possessing the oldest golf course in the world, the *Old Course*, and being the home of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club which establishes the rules of golf for players everywhere except the USA and Mexico. Golf courses are not generally regarded as sustainable developments and have often been criticized for the management policies adopted for these facilities, including excessive demands on local water supplies and the use of chemicals for pesticide elimination and vegetation growth (Briassoulis, 2007; Marwick, 2000). As well, golf courses often are also associated with what is generally perceived as a privileged elite user group and in most tourist destinations their management and operation has not been aimed at the local residents but rather for the short term visitor. The golf links at St Andrews, however, are very much an exception to this general pattern and one of the reasons for this lies in the nature of the ownership and control of the links themselves. The land was originally deeded to the town some centuries ago (Jarrett, 1995), golf having been played at St Andrews for over half a millennium, and up until the late 20th century this remained the case. This control was vested first in the Society of St Andrews Golfers, founded in 1754, and then their successor, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, established in 1934. St

Andrews had been described as a “metropolis of golfing” as early as 1691 (Munro, cited in Young, 1969, p. 207) and golf was very much a local activity, engaged in by residents and also students at the University of St Andrews over the centuries. The result of local ownership and management meant that local golfers had guaranteed access to the course (later courses), and the citizens had the right to walk over the Links on Sundays when the *Old Course* was closed, and no fees were charged for playing. Over the decades from the 1830s the situation has changed somewhat, reflecting both the cost of maintaining not only the *Old Course* but another five courses in the town (and since 2008 one beyond the town boundary), and the increasing popularity of golf as a tourist attraction and activity (Butler, in press b). Various negotiations ensued, leaving the Royal and Ancient Golf Club in charge of the operation and management of the courses, with ownership being vested in the local government. So important was this arrangement that in the 1970s when local government was being reorganized in the United Kingdom, that the town council and the Royal and Ancient Golf Club succeeded in gaining a private Act of Parliament to create the St Andrews Links Trust. This charitable non-profit making body was enshrined with the responsibility of the management of the Links. It was created because the town residents feared that St Andrews would disappear as a decision making body following local government (as was the case) and ownership and thus control of the Links would pass out of the town to Dundee or west Fife (Butler, in press c). The Provost at the time expressed local feeling well when he stated “The idea of booking a round on the *Old Course* through a Parks Superintendent in City Square, Dundee, was preposterous”. (Provost Gilchrist, cited in *St Andrews Citizen*, May 25, 1971).

Despite what may be seen as relatively minor disagreements over policy, the local control of the Links has been a success in terms of sustainable development. The Links Trust has four members appointed by the Royal and Ancient and four by the local authorities, two of whom at least are normally from St Andrews. Local residents have continued (albeit reduced) priority on play on the *Old Course* on two of the six days it is open each week, and pay what would seem absurdly low annual fees for a ticket to play on the Links. Children in the town under the age of 18 play free on all courses except the *Old Course* and the relatively high charges made to tourists (around 150 Euros per round in 2010) not only cover the costs of maintaining all of the courses but along with receipts from the Open Golf Tournament (organized annually by the Royal and Ancient, a separate organisation established in 2004) provide funds to sponsor tournaments, support young golfers and golf generally in many locations. The Links Trust is not without its critics, particularly among some long term resident golfers in

the town, but internationally and generally within the community, it is seen as performing a difficult task very well. On the environmental front the Trust has won awards for its programmes (St Andrews Links Trust, 2009), it uses indigenous grass species, little or no pesticide, grows its own replacement turf and has its own water supply, thus not drawing on the water supply for the town (Woodcock, personal communication, 2009).

The lesson that can be learned from these two examples is not so much that local control is the key to successful operation and management of destinations or facilities but more that local control is the key to local satisfaction with destination and facility management, and in particular, that there is an agency in control. In both of the cases cited above, primary concern has been with identifying local priorities and concerns and ensuring that these were given a high priority through gaining control at the local level of the key elements. In the case of Shetland, local control was extended through pressure at the national level for a specific purpose, controlling development related to offshore oil exploitation, which has provided the ability to control other activities (including fish-farming and tourism) and keep them at a scale and of such a type that met local concerns. In the case of the golf courses at St Andrews, the threat of loss of local control resulting in safeguarding this principle, again through action at the national level, so that development and management would be answerable to those using the Links on an everyday basis rather than to those occasional, if numerous, visitors or to political agencies beyond the local boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Local control is not always the answer to local concerns, and neither is it a guarantee of sustainable development or appropriate forms and levels of tourism. It should not be forgotten that many developments that are now regarded as unsuitable and unsustainable were made with the active encouragement of local residents, of which Benidorm in Spain is perhaps one of the most vivid examples. However, sustainable development principles appear to include some level of local input and preference, and since at least the publication of Murphy's book, *Tourism A Community Approach* in 1985, local and community participation in planning and development has been regarded as a "good thing" (although in recent years the perceived superiority of this approach has been challenged (e.g., Butcher, 2010). If the principle that local residents should be able to participate actively in deciding the nature, scale and rate of tourism (and other) development is accepted, and that such a state of affairs is a part of the application of the concept of sustainable development, then at least a degree of local control would seem

to be essential. In many cases local opposition, whether as portrayed by Doxey (1975) or otherwise, has often stemmed from a feeling of helplessness and lack of control over development occurring in the local community (Keller, 1987), and as suggested in the original TALC article (Butler, 1980) is often expressed in the later stages of that cycle when tourism appears to be declining and few alternatives are seen. One frequent reaction is for attempts to regain local control of tourism in the community, although in many cases this is often too late to reverse a trend which may have commenced in the early stages of development, as foreseen by Plog (1972) and others (e.g., Pearce, 1989).

The basic arguments of this paper have been that there is similarity and complementarity between the TALC and Sustainable Development principles as applied to tourism, that the stage in the TALC entitled “stagnation” represents one form of sustainability, and most importantly, that both concepts rely crucially on the acceptance of the idea of limits or carrying capacity. The last term has had a varied history in tourism and recreation, emerging from the latter in the 1960s and being adopted enthusiastically in tourism only to be superseded by other approaches such as the Limits of Acceptable Change (Butler, 1996, 2010). While determining any level, even an approximation, of the carrying capacity of a tourist destination is fraught with difficulty and likely to generate opposing views, to ignore the concept completely is avoiding a real problem and opposed to the principles of sustainable development. There can be little doubt that destinations do become over-developed, that is, that at some point many developments exceed their ability to accommodate the number of visitors arriving and to provide a satisfactory experience for visitors and residents alike. It is not a simple matter of crowding, insufficient parking spaces, lack of space on a beach, line ups for facilities or inability to secure accommodation, although all of these may be representations of over-development. Such a state might also include an insufficient water supply, inadequate sewage treatment facilities, inflation of prices for land, labour and services, inability of locals to secure housing, and inadequate facilities for those working in the tourism industry. Without the ability of some authority to control development so that it is both in line with local preferences and within the capacity of the destination, continued over-development is likely to damage the attractiveness of destinations throughout the world. Such a situation would also make a mockery of proclamations by governments, tourist agencies, DMOs and others up to and including UNWTO, who claim the existence of “sustainable tourism” in innumerable locations. It also runs counter to the questionable claims that tourists are seeking a more sustainable form of tourism (Miller, 2003). This is to say nothing of the “elephant in the room” of the unsustainability of travel to many desti-

nations, but that is different issue which others (e.g., Wheeler, 2009) have commented on. It is not being argued here that control would automatically resolve all problems and result automatically in a more sustainable form of tourism, but the argument can certainly be made that lack of overall control over development in and promotion of a destination will make any form of sustainable tourism in that destination unsustainable in a very short time.

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