Opinion piece

A clear path towards sustainable mass tourism? Rejoinder to the paper 'Organic, incremental and induced paths to sustainable mass tourism convergence' by David B. Weaver

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 1 December 2011
Accepted 8 January 2012

Keywords:
Sustainable development
Mass tourism
Systems thinking

A B S T R A C T

The paper forms a rejoinder to the paper by David Weaver (‘Organic, incremental and induced paths to sustainable mass tourism convergence’). It fully agrees with David Weaver that a sustainable development of tourism should focus on sustainable mass tourism development and not, as is currently the case, so much on niche products labelled ‘sustainable’. However, it critiques Weaver’s operationalization of sustainability, his assumption that sustainable mass tourism (SMT) will be the ‘emergent norm’ due to external factors, and his destination development theory showing different paths that, however, all end in SMT. Finally it is shown that the path development idea might be at odds with systems thinking.

The subject of Weaver’s opinion piece, sustainable development of tourism, is a very relevant one as the tourism sector is not developing in an environmentally sustainable manner (e.g. for climate change Peeters & Dubois, 2010; Scott, Peeters, & Gössling, 2010 and global environmental change Gössling, 2002; Gössling & Hall, 2006). As most tourism is mass tourism, it is very welcome to have a discussion about the sustainability of mass tourism. Too many sustainable tourism papers describe only niches (e.g. pro-poor, ecotourism, community based tourism, volunteer tourism), without clarifying how this fits the changes required for the whole tourism system. Furthermore, Weaver uses ‘regulation’ as a proxy for ‘sustainability’ indicating he is highly aware of the important role of regulation to gain sustainable development. The most challenging statement by Weaver is that ‘sustainable mass tourism’ is the ‘desired and impending’ outcome for the development of tourism. This conclusion is based on a claim that five external factors – conventional/renewable resource price convergence, climate change awareness, the global financial crisis, institutionalised environmentalism and the Internet – will guide the sector into an ‘emergent norm of sustainability’, combined with the ‘entrenched norm of support for growth’.

Part of Weaver’s reasoning is based on his destination development theory, operationalized by plotting development paths on two axes, one of scale (tourism volume) and one of level of regulation. Within this plot, Weaver discerns three distinct development paths that, however, all end in fully regulated high volume tourism or sustainable mass tourism (SMT). The ‘incremental path’ is characterised by a high level of regulation preceding volume development and is most associated with destinations in vulnerable areas like nature parks. The ‘organic path’, is the opposite development, where volume develops first followed by regulation after the ‘mass state’ and when a state of ‘unsustainable mass tourism’ has been reached. In this case regulation may be triggered by severe negative impacts at the location. This ‘organic path’ most resembles the tourism area life cycle (TALC) idea espoused by Butler (1980, 2006a,b) and is most common for current mass tourism destinations. The third path, the ‘induced path’, is in the middle of the two other paths where both scale and regulation develop simultaneously. Though the idea of ‘sustainable mass tourism deserves further development, I do not agree with the far reaching conclusions founded in weak empiricism, a flawed systems approach and an inadequate definition of sustainable development.

To start with, to define sustainability Weaver assumes that all tourism always will “entail cost” and that sustainable development simply means to minimise environmental cost “whilst concurrently maximising the attendant benefits, both locally and globally” (first page). This cost-focused definition is not very helpful to understand sustainable development. Sustainable development is the result of the dynamics of a system within certain conditions or limits. The outcome of this dynamic system is based not only on costs but also benefits, thresholds, carrying capacities and absorption abilities.

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DOI of original article: 10.1016/j.tourman.2011.08.011.

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within the system. The point is that the dynamic relationships between all of these factors should be such that the total natural capital is maintained, not continuously eroded. Ecosystems deliver all sorts of resources to humanity and will continue to do so, as long as we do not over-exploit them. In simple terms, as long as our cattle eat the grass no faster than it grows, there is a form of sustainability in the pasture. Goodland and Daly have specified that there are two principles of sustainability in resource management: (1) the speed of resources withdrawal must be equal to the regeneration capability and (2) the speed of waste production must be equal to absorption capability of the ecosystems on which they are drawn (Goodland & Daly, 1996). In other words, there is no merit in judging sustainability by just reducing environmental or social costs as much as possible.

One of Weaver’s main conclusions is that sustainability, as a social norm, is emerging. He underpins this by pointing to five external developments: conventional/renewable resource price convergence, climate change awareness, the global financial crisis, institutionalised environmentalism and the Internet. I am afraid I am not really convinced by most of the claims made for each of these factors. For instance, the conventional/renewable resource prices indeed do converge, but this mechanism will definitely come too late and be too little to avoid dangerous climate change on its own. For avoiding dangerous climate change, the global emissions are required to peak very soon and go into a sharp decline (a 2015 peak requires a reduction of 3% per year and a 2025 peak 6%; see e.g. Scott et al., 2010). The point is that current oil price hikes are caused by disequilibrium between demand and supply, not by a strong increase of production cost. This means that renewables still are more expensive to produce and thus the total amount of fossil fuel that will finally be depleted, if left to economic forces only, is likely not to peak already in 2015 or 2025, thus by far surpassing the sustainable limit of carbon dioxide concentrations. Some form of government interference is needed by either levying high taxes on fossil fuel use or by legislatively limiting supply. Also climate awareness is a rather weak argument because, due to the huge time lags in the climate system between the human causes and the climatic effects, impact induced awareness will simply come far too late. Furthermore, awareness so far does not seem to change tourist behaviour (e.g. Barr, Gilg, & Shaw, 2011; Hares, Dickinson, & Wilkes, 2009; McKercher, Prideaux, Cheung, & Law, 2010). So why would the tourism sector react, while it always neatly follows the average customer? The Global Financial Crisis is not likely to make any difference towards environmental sustainability, because it will generate several contradictory effects. On the one hand, the crisis may reduce long haul travel, but on the other hand it will shift political attention to economic issues and away from environmental ones. As soon as the economic crisis comes to an end, tourism will resume its unsustainable path. Regarding institutionalised environmentalism, I am not sure if the increasing dependency of environmental NGOs on industry and government funds will make them more effective. Of course the industry may take better account of opinions of NGOs when they have some sort of agreement but those opinions will be diluted by industry’s interests weakening the arguments for greater sustainability. This also may happen to scholars affiliated with the industry. Finally the role of the Internet. Of course there might be positive impacts for helping people to find out how to adopt sustainable lifestyles, but my impression is that the Internet has also enabled and promoted specifically long haul travel (confirmed by findings of Conradi, 2007). Without widespread Internet access, most long distance travel would have been restricted to the more adventurous tourist, while now almost every tourist is able to participate. The net effect remains to be seen, but as the Internet is just a medium enabling all sorts of communication, I do not see how it will specifically shift the market towards sustainable products. All in all, I agree that there may be some incentives from the five factors to reduce environmental costs, but most will come too late and have too little effect.

A second part of Weaver’s argument comprises some cases for each of the three developments paths. An example of the incremental path is Dominica’s action plan. The goal of this plan is doubling the revenues from inbound tourism by improving the airport and accommodation. It was successful as it increased the total number of visitors by a factor 2.5 over a ten year period, mainly because of an increase of cruise ship visitors. Weaver concludes that the “average of 1400 visitors per day (…) does not necessarily constitute an environmental or socio-cultural threat to the mountainous and thickly vegetated island” (fifth page). However, Weaver ignores that such forms of tourism constitute a serious threat to the global environment. Cruises represent one of the most unsustainable forms of tourism with respect to climate change (e.g. Eijgelaar, Thaper, & Peeters, 2010). Two other examples for the incremental path are tourism to the Galapagos and the Antarctic. For both I do not see how it can sustainably accommodate mass tourism, comprising millions of visitors, as the regions are very vulnerable, remote and their product base predicated on sensitive natural environments. The tension between vulnerability and massive human presence speaks for itself. Additionally, the remote location of both destinations causes disproportionate large carbon footprints for travel. The largest footprint per trip is reached in Antarctic cruise tourism (Eijgelaar et al., 2010). If humanity would really care about these two world natural heritage sites, a ban on most tourism at least should be seriously discussed. For the organic path the case of Las Vegas is presented. Though the municipality seems active in stimulating energy saving and the use of renewable energy sources, Las Vegas will have great difficulties in becoming an SMT. This is simply because it is in the wrong place. The area suffers serious water supply problems and may even face a full dry year by 2021 (see Barnett & Pierce, 2008, 2009; Barsugli, Nowak, Rajagopalan, Prairie, & Harding, 2009). Finally, Weaver highlights the development of Cancun to illustrate the induced path. However, Cancun has been criticised for its unsustainable tourism development: “Cancun is a living example of ecological devastation; it’s the hotels, the tourism and the sexual trafficking of women. It is the antithesis of sustainable development” (Daily Independent (Nigeria), 2010). From the same news message it can be deduced that most mangroves were cut in the 1970s but that since 2007 law forbids further cutting, which does give some support to the induce path idea. The evidence for the impending outcome of SMT is not convincing. Unfortunately this leads to some disputable statements in Weaver’s For example, on second page Weaver asserts that air transport emissions can be tackled, because only part of the emissions are related to tourism; aviation causes just 3—5% of global emissions, and technology reduces the emissions per passenger—kilometre. Though all three remarks are true (the tourism share is some 73% of all aviation emissions; UNWTO–UNEP-WMO, 2008, p. 195 and aircraft fuel consumption may reduce with 30—40% by mid-21st century, Peeters & Middel, 2007), the information is inconclusive regarding aviation’s contribution to tourism’s CO₂ emissions. To assess this we need to know the growth rate of aviation, the rate of efficiency improvement and the rate of decline of emissions required for sustainable development. As we have shown above global tourism is not on a sustainable track with respect to climate change.

Weaver finds part of his evidence for the sustainable development of tourism in the “explicit support for sustainability”, which is “almost universal within the tourism industry (…) embedded in numerous corporate mission statements, codes of ethics, destination planning strategies, and organisational structures.” (Weaver, second page). Indeed such rhetoric seems manifold and abundant, but
almost none of the statements or codes are binding or causing serious repercussions where they are violated by the sector. The continued increase of tourism's share in global GHG emissions (e.g. Dubois, Ceron, Peeters, & Gössling, 2011; Peeters & Dubois, 2010) are clear proof that nothing substantial is changing. The position taken by the industry is generally one of fighting government action, spreading disinformation about the problems and science and delaying governance and measures instead of taking the position to help solve the issues (e.g. Gössling & Peeters, 2007; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Furthermore, the paper Weaver cites as evidence (Cowper-Smith & de Grosbois, 2010) also concludes “The data analysis supported the arguments made in the literature that the airlines report CSR initiatives using differing or inconsistent measurements, making evaluation and comparison of their performance and effectiveness difficult” (Cowper-Smith & de Grosbois, 2010, p. 59).

Another issue I want to raise is the way Weaver approaches the problem. Ideally it would fit into a longer tradition of systems thinking, but it does not. Leiper (1979) sets the foundation of a tourism systems theory (based on work by von Bertalanffy, 1969). Leiper divides the tourism system into three main elements: the region of origin (the market), the destination region and the region of transit (transport). Furthermore, his system includes natural resources and industrial and non-industrial elements and shows that the interactions between the elements provide a more comprehensive understanding of the system. By taking destinations as the basis of his model, Weaver ignores both regions of origin and of transit, thus hampering our understanding of the role of the transit and origin regions, both playing an important role in the most pressing global environmental problems. It is my conviction that we will never understand tourism if we keep focussing almost exclusively on the destination. Therefore, I do not support Weaver’s assertion that “a case study approach to analysing the underlying mechanisms that dictate whether a particular trajectory and time line is likely for a given destination is also warranted” (seventh page).

The dynamic interactions between destinations and the role of transport infrastructure and origin markets cannot be ignored, when sustainable development of tourism needs to be better understood.

Weaver also suggests that all destinations will develop towards a SMT position, from the logic that no one wants to advocate unsustainable development. In this way he ignores the fact that people can do things without wanting them to happen. Nobody wanted the Titanic to sink, but still the wrong decisions were taken and it did sink. Current decisions in tourism lead to unsustainable tourism development, and in the end this might cause serious trouble for the industry. Actually, Weaver acknowledges this insight in his discussion on second page, saying that “the prospects for sustainable tourism are not good” regarding a solution for the climate change issue. Another difficulty with the development path idea is the way these may evolve. By just considering volume and regulation, one of the most important insights from complex systems is missed. The first steps of any development often cause path dependency. The Las Vegas example illustrates this dependency. Las Vegas initially developed in the 1930s, when President Hoover decided to build a large dam in the area (Land & Land, 2004). As most incoming workers were male, this sparked off a market for entertainment and gambling. The industry developed well and, even when most workers were gone after building the dam, governments continued to support it. Currently, Las Vegas is an UMT and it is too late to relocate it because of the sunk cost and image. This effectively blocks development to an SMT. Had the biggest gambling industry been planned more carefully, it would most likely have chosen another location. A clear introduction to path-dependency of complex systems is given by Room (2011). Without accepting this path-dependency and some other complex system properties (e.g. tipping points), the value of Weaver’s theory is limited with respect to understanding sustainable development of mass tourism.

Furthermore, what message does his paper transmit to managers of tourism and tourism destinations? This seems twofold: sustainable mass tourism will naturally be the final stage of each destination, and volume (or economic) growth is a necessary and unavoidable part of sustainable development. I have disproved the first conclusion above. The second conclusion ignores a major discussion about growth and de-growth evolving in sustainable development of tourism (e.g. Hall, 2009, 2010; Kallis, 2011; Victor, 2010, in press). It is a pity that Weaver dismisses this discussion “given that their transformational counterparts presently have little traction and are unlikely to become widely influential in the foreseeable future” (second page). I am not sure if the role of scholars is to avoid confronting the sector with the best-known facts, even if the sector does not like them or has chosen to ignore them. My message to the sector would rather be to demand from politics an ‘even playing field’ in which low impact forms of tourism have the advantages of lower taxes, better infrastructure, and higher priority for improvements over high impact forms of tourism. This entails a larger emphasis on the development of (zero-carbon) rail networks, incentives for domestic and short haul tourism, and for high quality ‘slow tourism’. National and international legislation is inevitable, just as is the case for ecologically vulnerable destinations, supported by Weaver.

Based on the work of Weaver and several other scholars it is now time to systematically analyse and present the problems of tourism, and to clarify to stakeholders and politicians that we do face a serious problem but that the solutions are obvious and technically and economically achievable. What fails is political will. I fully agree with Weaver’s statement that the only sustainable future for tourism lies in sustainable mass tourism. His contribution of the development paths theory gives a first step, but its development since its foundation (Weaver, 2000) has been too slow and too theoretical. Indeed, in this new contribution, Weaver reinforces the status quo about growth, misunderstandings about the role of aviation and transport and the lack of a feeling of urgency within much of the sector. How can we explain to our grandchildren in 2080 that climate change was not tackled because we could not change our travel behaviour and we could not live happily without seeing Antarctica or the Galapagos? In another paper, Weaver writes about the sustainable tourism science literature: “Equally unfortunate is the failure of that literature which does exist to inform or have meaningful influence over the actions of the tourism industry, although this problem applies well beyond sustainable tourism and says much about the deeper longstanding dysfunctional relationship between academics and practitioners within tourism. These are indicative of a deep malaise that may not be overcome soon enough, and in the meantime one hopes, at least, that the community of tourism academics can produce its Rachel Carson” (Weaver, 2007, p. 68). David, why not take up this role?

References


