Opinion piece

Clearing the path to sustainable mass tourism: A response to Peeters

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Abstract

Peeters’ well-considered rejoinder emphasises the utility of a systems approach for framing the planning and management of sustainable tourism that takes into account global as well as local impacts. All five factors that are alleged to facilitate sustainable tourism are necessarily dynamic and speculative, and hence contestable, and more attention needs to be paid to the synergistic effects of all five interacting together. A reform-based path to sustainable mass tourism convergence, proceeding along organic, incremental and induced paths, is therefore still regarded as a valid macro-perspective on the evolution of contemporary tourism.

Opinion pieces are a specialised form of academic discourse, the main function of which is to stimulate constructive debate about attendant issues. Prepared in response to my piece about sustainable mass tourism convergence, the well-considered rejoinder by Peeters is evidence that this piece is fulfilling that purpose, providing as it does some excellent counter-arguments as well as suggestions for the path forward. One important point is the utility of a dynamics systems approach. The cost-benefit definition I advocate (i.e. sustainable tourism is about minimising costs and maximising benefits) is described as being ‘not very helpful to understand sustainable development’ (p. 2). However, I do not see this approach as being at all incompatible with the recommended systems approach, which provides an appropriate and complementary framework within which these costs and benefits can be contextualised, measured, monitored and assessed. As such it serves as a necessary first step towards a more systematic (no pun intended) empirical engagement with the issue. Similarly, I don’t see any contradiction between this and the case study approach I advocate, since the latter could include external (non-destination) dynamics such as the transportation vectors between a particular destination and the major origin regions of its visitors. This then helps to accommodate the issue of external impacts such as greenhouse gas emissions, which Peeters, with justification, argues are not given the attention they deserve in my piece in comparison with localised impacts.

As to the five factors which I regard as abetting the movement towards sustainability, the negatives proffered by Peeters, like my points of support, are necessarily speculative given the rapidly shifting terrain of all. For example, I concur that the elevated public concern over the issue of climate change has not translated into widespread behavioural change, but I think that those unprecedented levels of concern are significant in their own right, are not going to go away, and have contributed at least in part to the willingness of some governments to initiate tangible regulatory responses. The ongoing ‘climate wars’ keep the issue and associated concerns salient, and the landscape could change quite suddenly. But of greater import, perhaps, is the synergy among the five factors, which in my piece are unduly isolated from one another. How might these five factors (and others which I may have neglected to include) be working in tandem to effect synergistic change? One can imagine the concurrent roles of climate change and the GFC in generating, respectively, widespread public concern and anger, and the role of the Internet in both fostering and disseminating these emotions through issue exposure and mass awareness, which then might lead to critical thresholds of mobilisation and action, abetted by powerful environmental NGOs and the existence of innovative and feasible technological and social alternatives.

I am, therefore, and perhaps a bit naively, hopeful that tourism and society more generally will continue to move in the right direction, acknowledging that catastrophic impacts from climate change may already be or will soon inevitable but that no one will do anything radical about it as long as the direct evidence of such evidence is lacking (and by then, as Peeters points out, it is too late). But I do not believe that ‘the prospects for sustainable tourism are not good’, which Peeters quotes out of context from my piece. I only believe this to be so if we accept the premise of the slow tourism advocates that neither the reform nor status quo approaches to sustainability are sufficient to address at least the global impacts of tourism. I believe that they are sufficient, as long as the doomsday
scenario is overstated. In the case of Dominica, which I use to illustrate the ‘incremental’ path, I would continue to maintain as per localised impacts that visitation of 1400 or even 2000 visitors per pay is quite sustainable if, of course, properly regulated. As for the cruise ship industry and its global implications, it is true that destination sustainability planning continues to neglect this ‘externality’. Cruising does continue to constitute a threat to the environment, but many positive changes are also occurring within that sector in part because of escalating resource costs, technological innovation, increased national and international regulations and tariffs, increased self-regulation, and (alas) perhaps almost imperceptibly at this point, increased consumer activism. It is true, as in civil aviation, that these positive changes are offset by increased activity, but scale itself could be utilised as an advantage with, for example, agreement to implement a nominal (say US$5) environmental tax per passenger to at least partially compensate for the broader environmental impacts of cruising. As for other incremental destinations, Peeters’ concerns about the Antarctic Peninsula and the Galapagos are well taken, although it’s hard to foresee ‘millions’ of tourists visiting these places. Of course, the construct of mass tourism is somewhat relative to the scale of the destination, so it can exist at a much lower level (e.g. 200,000 or 300,000 per year) that is more probable. (I should have also emphasised my sense that all tourism is already mass tourism given how all travel seems connected to the single globalised juggernaut of corporate tourism.)

As for ‘organic’ path examples such as Cancun and Las Vegas, I agree that current problems with tourism are still serious. However, a critical qualifier in my piece is that destinations are generally moving in this direction — they have not necessarily already moved there (and here again is where a systems framework might help to make that judgement). There is the risk that the patient can still die (e.g. Las Vegas is abandoned), but it is more likely to me that communities of concerned and mobilised citizens (including representatives from government and industry) will arise to deal with those serious problems, giving substance to the ‘arena of innovation’ that such places become when critical capacity thresholds are breeched. I suspect that this breeching is soon followed by the attainment of critical thresholds of concerned and mobilised citizens to plug those breeches, giving credence to the aphorism that unsustainability is ultimately unsustainable.

Finally, there is the question of what kind of message my piece sends to the tourism industry. Given the disconnection between academia and industry, I would be flattered if it sends any message at all. To the extent that some message is received, I hope that this is not about sustainability being a ‘natural’ outcome requiring therefore that nothing need be done. Quite to the contrary, what appears natural to me is the increasing proclivity among diverse stakeholders to mobilise, innovate and be proactive — to do something — especially at critical junctures of development. But I’m not sure whether slow tourism is the ‘something’ that needs to be done. I was not intending to be dismissive of the latter, which as a theoretical construct has merit and high appeal (to me personally as well). However, slow tourism must evolve quickly (if it can!) into a cogent and convincing operational construct that destination managers and other stakeholders will willingly take on board, even though I suspect that successful prototypes will attract the kind of demand that stimulates the intensification of the incremental path, as per my model.

Of course I would like to send a strong and convincing message to the public to accelerate sustainability adherence, and in so doing take up the role of tourism’s Rachel Carson, as Paul challenges me to do. But first I have to get my thoughts and ideas articulated in my own mind, which is a lengthy process for any academic. And then there is the challenge of public engagement. In the meanwhile, perhaps this incipient debate will inspire other tourism academics to aspire similarly — tourism right now could use a Rachel Carson and a David Suzuki.