Opinion Piece

Organic, incremental and induced paths to sustainable mass tourism convergence

David B. Weaver*

Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Southport, Queensland 4222, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper positions sustainable mass tourism (SMT) as the desired and impending outcome for most destinations. Natural resource scarcity, development of green technology, climate change awareness, the global financial crisis, institutionalised environmentalism and Internet technology all facilitate the emergence of sustainability as a societal norm that is combining with the longer established norm of growth desirability. SMT convergence is occurring along three distinctive paths in an evolutionary manner that reflects environmental pragmatism. The market-driven ‘organic’ path describes the conventional tourism area life cycle model of Butler, whilst the regulation-driven ‘incremental’ path entails deliberate alternative tourism (DAT) in which carrying capacities are gradually increased to accommodate higher visitation levels. The hybrid ‘induced’ path describes planned mega-resorts conceived as growth poles. Each model is invested with its own specific planning and management implications.

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1. Introduction

The sustained growth and spatial diffusion of tourism is a remarkable global phenomenon of the post World War Two era. By way of identifying the macro-processes that describe such expansion, this paper contends firstly that sustainable mass tourism has become the emerging and desired outcome for most destinations; secondly, that the movement towards sustainable mass tourism is an evolutionary rather than revolutionary process; and thirdly, that destinations are converging towards sustainable mass tourism along distinctive organic, incremental and induced trajectories. The paper begins by examining the status of sustainability as a neo-normative phenomenon universally embraced by the tourism industry. Factors that account for the increased and continuing adoption of certain kinds of sustainability practices are then presented, and this is followed by a discussion of the concurrent support for sustainability and growth that respectively underpins and supports the first and second contentions. A presentation of the three trajectories follows, and the paper concludes with a discussion of implications. This macro-perspective is intended to stimulate discussion and debate on current and desired contemporary tourism development trends concerning the relationship between growth and sustainability.

2. The case for sustainable mass tourism (SMT) as the emerging tourism state

To articulate the argument that SMT is the emergent and desired state of contemporary tourism, the two constituent components of sustainability and growth are sequentially discussed.

2.1. Sustainability

The idea of sustainability has come to enjoy strong rhetorical success within the tourism sector since its popularisation through the World Conservation Strategy (IUCN, UNEP & WWF, 1980) and Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). The latter report advocated a referentially inter-generational definition of ‘sustainable development’ that continues to enjoy wide currency despite its lack of operational clarity (i.e. tourism development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2010) has equated sustainability with ‘guaranteed respect’ for local environments, societies and cultures, while the attainment of ‘triple-bottom line’ outcomes (i.e. economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability) is now widely evoked (Elkington, 1998).

Recognising that all tourism entails cost, Weaver (2006) associates sustainability with strategic management that strives to minimise the direct and indirect costs of a given activity whilst concurrently maximising the attendant benefits, both locally and generally. This definition, which is adopted in this paper, promotes...
economic, environmental and socio-cultural enhancement, and thus moves beyond the status quo connotations of Brundtland. Recognising that identified costs and benefits are context-dependent, this definition also embraces Hunter’s (1997) idea of sustainability as an adaptive paradigm with ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ manifestations. The former, for example, employ biocentric indicators and thresholds suitable for ecologically vulnerable settings, while the latter apply indicators and thresholds appropriate for urban and other highly modified settings.

However construed, explicit support for sustainability is almost universal within the tourism industry (rhetorically speaking, who would openly support unsustainable tourism?). ‘Sustainable tourism’ or its variants are now neo-normative phenomena embedded in numerous corporate mission statements, codes of ethics, destination planning strategies, and organisational structures. Recognition of environmental or social responsibility, for example, was explicit in the mission statements of 15 of 50 major airlines examined in the early 2000s (Kemp & Dwyer, 2003). Successive Statements and Declarations since the late 1980s have established sustainability as a core UNWTO principle (2011), whilst similar support is displayed by the World Travel and Tourism Council in its Blueprint for New Tourism (WTTC, 2003).

At the same time, associated interpretations of sustainability as an operational imperative are extremely diverse due to the construct’s inherent ambiguity and malleability. Hopwood, Mellor and O’Brien (2005) capture this diversity in their proposal of ‘status quo’, ‘reform’ and ‘transformational’ perspectives on sustainable development, each perspective advocating respectively higher levels of ecocentric and human wellbeing outcome through concomitantly higher levels of social, cultural and political change. The weak and strong sustainability of Hunter (1997) would appear to accord respectively with the status quo and transformational approaches.

Within the tourism industry, the translation of rhetoric into reality is reflected through the increasing ubiquity of practices and indicators, beyond legal compliance, that align with the status quo and reform perspectives. Recycling targets and measures that reduce energy and water consumption are now normative in hotels (Bohdanowicz, 2009; Stipanuk, 2001) and airlines (Cowper-Smith & de Grosbois, 2011). Exemplified by linen-reuse signs displayed in hotel rooms to reduce energy costs, such operational practices represent incremental (or continuous), rather than radical (or discontinuous), innovation (Könnölä & Unruh, 2007). They also reflect opportunistic or ‘pragmatic environmentalism’ insofar as they are relatively inexpensive to implement, produce substantial short-term cost savings (i.e. both internal referents), and provide visible (and participatory) evidence of a corporation’s ‘green’ credentials/image (i.e. an external referent) (Bonilla-Priego, Najera, & Font, 2011).

Crucially, such practices are implemented with little or no change to existing organisational or social structures and do not contradict basic capitalist premises of output growth and profitability. Accordingly, they reflect adaptive ‘paradigm nudge’ rather than transformational paradigm shift (Weaver, 2007). Because most consumers are superficial environmentalists who are ‘concerned’ but reluctant to participate in personally inconvenient remedial actions (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), there is currently no concerted public pressure for industry to move transformationally – linen-reuse signs and similar initiatives are apparently enough to assuage guest concerns about the environment. This also helps to account for negligible corporate participation in environmental certification initiatives, which involve significant recurrent expense, require adherence to an externally determined set of criteria, cede substantial control to third party entities, and do not yet influence consumers’ tourism purchasing decisions (Black & Crabtree, 2007).

2.1.1. Factors underlying increased adoption of sustainable practices

Advocates of transformational approaches such as ‘slow tourism’ (Conway & Timms, 2010) and ‘degrowth’ (Hall, 2009) may argue that neither the status quo nor reform options are sufficient to address mega-issues such as climate change or even more localised problems. If true, then the prospects for sustainable tourism are not good, given that their transformational counterparts presently have little traction and are unlikely to become widely influential in the foreseeable future. It is argued here, however, that even under the dominance of the status quo and reform approaches, sustainability-related practices through evolutionary rather than revolutionary processes will increasingly become not only more pervasive but more effective in dealing with environmental and socio-cultural problems. At least five factors support this contention.

2.1.1.1. Conventional/renewable resource price convergence

The likelihood of peak oil in the early decades of the 21st century (Bardi, 2009; Yeoman et al., 2007) reflects a wider pattern of actual and impending resource price escalation that will necessitate further cost-driven measures in tourism and elsewhere to reduce natural resource inputs in goods and services (Bohdanowicz, 2009). Concurrently, despite technological and structural lock-in constraints and market barriers that discourage radical innovation (Arthur, 1989; Owen, 2006), ‘green’ technologies continue to evolve incrementally, driven largely by this rise in conventional resource costs. Many are approaching or achieving cost-competitiveness in relation to conventional technologies. Previously unviable practices such as the installation of solar panels are becoming more feasible and widely adopted, with production economies of scale lowering prices further (Gross, Leach, & Bauen, 2003).

Regarding tourism impacts, Høyen (2000) distinguishes between ‘intensity perspective’ local issues such as traffic congestion and waste disposal that can be addressed readily in individual cases, and global ‘volume perspective’ issues such as climate change whose resolution is complicated by unclear consequences, long time lines and the need for close international collaboration. The localised transition to renewable energy, in this context, can have positive shorter-term outcomes for individual destinations whilst cumulatively making a positive contribution to greenhouse gas mitigation (Weaver, 2011). More difficult to reduce, due to tourism growth and the lack of scope for substituting renewable energy sources, are airline emissions. However, their net contributions are (a) not all related to tourism, (b) estimated at just 3–5% of emissions (Daley, Dimitriou, & Thomas, 2008), and (c) declining per passenger due to improved technological efficiencies and the implementation of mitigative strategies (Cowper-Smith & de Grosbois, 2011). Vehicular emissions are similarly difficult to reduce, though the feasibility of mass conversion to electric-drive vehicles powered by renewable energy is widely envisaged (Kempton & Tomić, 2005).

2.1.1.2. Climate change awareness

Public exposure to the climate change issue through the 2006 documentary An Inconvenient Truth, the joint awarding of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize to Al Gore and the IPCC, and subsequent media saturation, has made society more aware of, concerned about, and supportive of action to counter its potentially catastrophic effects (Whitmash, 2009). Notably, however, psychological mobilisation has not yet translated into a mass willingness to take the necessary but inconvenient behavioural decisions required to mitigate and avoid those impacts, particularly given the influence of well-publicised narratives of climate change denial and scepticism (Piltz, 2008; Weaver, 2011).

This attitude/behaviour gap may be even more pronounced in tourism-related decisions (Barr et al., 2010; Gössling, Bredberg,
Randow, Svensson, & Swedlin, 2006; Line, Chatterjee, & Lyons, 2010), and there is little evidence for the emergence of allegedly enlightened markets such as the ‘new tourist’ (Poon, 1993) or ‘post-Fordist tourist’ (Ioannides & Debbage, 1997) as sufficiently large or influential consumer segments whose travel behaviour substantively reflects their proclaimed ethical or environmental concerns. Whilst consistent with the societal norm of superficial environmentalism, it is also nevertheless conceivable that new information about climate change impacts and new severe weather events might stimulate wider consumer advocacy for green tourism products as well as broader support for more stringent regulation of the sector, heeding calls by Scott (2011) for concerted action. Given the conservative nature of society, such action however is likely to reflect the reform rather than the transformational perspective on sustainable development and thus be conducive to continued evolutionary change.

2.1.1.3. Global financial crisis (GFC). The global financial crisis of the early 21st century in the short term has curtailed international tourism growth and arguably relegated sustainability-related issues to secondary status as corporations focus on core financial concerns. Longer term implications for sustainability are more subtle and relate to the climate of anger, anxiety and resentment that emerged from the experience of widespread hardship and uncertainty (Kenway & Fahey, 2010). It is suggested here that such emotions may encourage a more general questioning of the greed, financial speculation and deregulation of the capitalist status quo, and stimulate calls for reform that are conducive to the further adoption of externally-referenced sustainability principles and practices. Past experience with such crises indicates that a radical or revolutionary response that fundamentally questions the ethos of capitalism, as per the transformational perspective, is unlikely at least in economically well developed societies.

2.1.1.4. Institutionalisation of environmentalism. The development of the environmental movement since the 1960s has led to the creation of well-articulated, well-funded and highly motivated environmental organisations mandated to work towards a more sustainable planet. Such institutionalisation spawns a more conservative outlook characterised by cooperation with industry and emphasis on evolutionary, consensus-based change (Mol, 2000). The percolation of this effect to tourism is illustrated by the formation of the International Tourism Partnership (ITP), which exists to facilitate the wider adoption of sustainability practices within industry. The patronage of the Prince of Wales and a portfolio of celebrity corporate members (e.g. AMEX, Hyatt, Marriott) lend both credibility and clout to the dissemination of initiatives that demonstrate pragmatic environmentalism. As such, it is likely more than an entity for corporate greenwashing, but less than an agent of radical transformation.

Tourism Concern, in contrast, is more adversarial towards industry (styling itself as ‘David’ against the tourism ‘Goliath’), focusing with some success on grassroots advocacy against tourism-related exploitation (Barnett, 2008). Yet, its emphasis on heightening awareness and encouraging industry to be more socially responsible (‘it is not always possible to effect desired structural changes’ (Barnett, 2008, p. 998)) similarly indicates a reformist approach that is perhaps stronger than the ITP but still not obviously transformational.

2.1.1.5. The Internet Organisations such as ITP and Tourism Concern opportunistically employ the Internet to distribute sustainability information. Those pursuing sustainability can now access such a plethora of information that discriminating between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sources is a critical strategic skill. The Internet also facilitates sustainability by fostering ‘imagined’ online communities focused on environmental and/or social issues. According to Rokka and Moisander (2009), these communities are already synergistically identifying and articulating sustainable lifestyles (including travel) and new forms of active environmental citizenship. The authors emphasise that transnational issues such as climate change are appropriately addressed in the transnational realm of the Internet and its cosmopolitan online communities.

2.2. Growth

Sustainability as a principle, then, is not only widely supported, but tangible as an increasingly normative set of pragmatic operational practices reflecting especially the reform perspective of sustainable development. Notably, sustainable tourism in the 1980s was embodied in small-scale, low-growth ‘alternative tourism’ such as homestays and ecotourism (Dernoi, 1981; Romeril, 1985). Subsequently, Butler (1990) and others critiqued alternative tourism and clarified its status as only a partial solution to the problems of mainstream tourism (Jafari, 2001). It was logical that attention should then turn to the possibilities of sustainable mass tourism, abetted by Jafari’s contextualisation of both mass and alternative tourism as sustainable options under appropriate circumstances and Hunter’s (1997) aforementioned idea of sustainability as an adaptive paradigm with strong and weak manifestations. Jafari and Hunter both complement the highly influential Brundtland report, which enthusiastically embraced the desirability of growth (i.e. ‘development’), though conditionally as ‘a different form of growth’ (i.e. ‘sustainable’) (Hopwood, Mellor, & O’Brien, 2005, p. 39) embedded in the reform approach.

The support for growth in these positions, and the parallel inertia of transformational approaches such as slow tourism, reflect another lock-in effect wherein growth is taken for granted and entrenched as a desirable societal norm. Most organisations, elements and individuals are assessed by dictates of short-term production increases rather than long-term sustainability outcomes, thus both reflecting and reinforcing an embedded ‘growth is good’ mentality. Economies of scale created by and associated with growth, moreover, are widely perceived as facilitating attempts to become sustainable. Large corporations exert pressure on suppliers for ‘green’ products, possess structural capacities to establish specialised sustainability entities, and operate at levels that make measures such as recycling profitable and enable discounted bulk purchases of products such as LED lighting.

Accordingly, hotel case studies of sustainability operational best practice usually feature large corporations (Bohdanowicz, 2009; Speck, 2002). With regard to protected areas, Hall (2009) acknowledges the risks of large-scale tourism for the management and expansion of the global conservation estate but also recognises its positive revenue contributions to their long-term survival. He also suggests that slow tourism does not necessarily mean less tourism, but can also entail redirected short-haul tourism as well as new economic and activity arrangements.

Support for growth is encouraged by past and projected patterns of tourism demand. Tourism between 1950 and 2010 exhibited a remarkable pattern of sustained growth from about 25 million to 900 million international stayovers (with about 5× this number in domestic tourists (Hall & Lew, 2005)). Attendee periods of retreat were not frequent, prolonged or deep, and declines in long-haul international travel moreover were often offset by increased domestic and short-haul travel. Despite the relative severity of the current GFC, the UNWTO in 2010 maintained its global forecast for 1.6 billion international stayovers by 2020 (UNWTO, 2010), implying over 10 billion trips overall. This optimism rests largely on expectations of continued rapid economic
development in China and India, which by 2020 are each expected to have middle classes numbering in the hundreds of millions (Bussolo, De Hoyos, Medvedev, & van der Mensbrugghe, 2007; Harris, 2005) with greatly increased outbound and domestic travel proclivities (UNWTO, 2010).

3. Paths to sustainable mass tourism convergence

It is proposed that the entrenched pro-growth norm has combined during the past two decades with the more incipient sustainability norm to position SMT as the desired destination outcome. Destinations, in addition, are converging towards SMT along three distinct paths all originating with circumstantial alternative tourism. These paths can be superimposed over Weaver’s (2000a) ‘broad context model of destination development scenarios’, which depicts four inclusive tourism ideal types defined by scale and sustainability-conducive regulation (Fig. 1). Circumstantial alternative tourism (CAT), or unregulated alternative tourism that merely indicates the initial stage of the destination life cycle, is positioned as the common incipient state of all destinations. Minimally or unregulated progression from CAT towards more intensive but unsustainable mass tourism (UMT) embodies the 5-curve component of Butler’s well-known tourism area life cycle (Butler, 1980). To date, most evolutionary analyses of destinations, at various scales, have been contextualised within the constraints of this familiar ‘Butler sequence’.

The broad context model moves the planning and management of destinations beyond this basic framework by recognising possibilities for the proactive implementation of measures which better ensure environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable outcomes for large- or small-scale tourism, as per the ‘knowledge-based platform’ of Jafari (2001). Accordingly, destinations in principle can cultivate deliberate alternative tourism (DAT) through regulations which ensure the preservation of small-scale alternative tourism practices which were hitherto circumstantial, or move to attain sustainable mass tourism (SMT) through regulations more relevant to large-scale modes of tourism activity. The three trajectories depicted in Fig. 1 articulate the evolutionary paths of tourism from CAT to SMT and are described in turn.

3.1. Organic path

The initial sequence from CAT to UMT follows a trajectory of largely spontaneous (i.e. ‘organic’) market-led growth that corresponds to the involvement, development, consolidation and stagnation stages of the Butler sequence (Weaver, 2000a). Butler (1980) speculated that stagnation is eventually superseded by decline if no remedial measures are implemented, and by rejuvenation if they are, and that these measures would usually involve new attractions drawing new markets. Two US examples were the 1970s introduction of casinos to Atlantic City (Braunlich, 1996) and the 1990s ‘family friendly’ branding of Las Vegas (Parker, 1999). In neither case were the measures affiliated with triple-bottom line sustainability outcomes, and thus they did not necessarily facilitate SMT. Ultimately, the only option for long-term rejuvenation is a broader destination reorientation towards SMT through enabling government regulation and industry self-regulation, as per Fig. 1.

Such a reorientation in contemporary mass tourism is abetted by the almost ubiquitous rhetoric in support of sustainability, and facilitated by the five factors outlined in Section 2.1.1. Also critical are dynamics of the UMT state itself, including the aforementioned opportunities afforded by economies of scale. Increased sense of crisis and dysfunction, moreover, may inspire challenges to the lock-in effects that discourage change, disposing the UMT destination to become an ‘arena of innovation’ for entrepreneurs and agents. More spontaneously, as Butler (1980) notes, withdrawal of government investment money from the ‘failing’ state may create openings for the re-entry of local entrepreneurs possibly more vested in its long-term wellbeing. Such dynamics suggest that UMT is an unstable and transitional state that ultimately facilitates sustainability.

Calvià, a municipality in Spain’s Balearic Islands which reached a crisis point in the late 1980s following several decades of rapid and unsustainable development (Essex, Kent, & Newnham, 2004), illustrates this paradox. Subsequent responses by local stakeholders, supported by the adoption of a Local Agenda 21, included a prohibition on the conversion of hotels to apartments, a requirement that new hotel beds (including renovations) must be at least a 3-star level, and extensive demolition of older buildings to reduce over-crowding and help improve the area’s environmental quality within a weak sustainability framework that continues to emphasise high population densities (Aguiló, Alegre, & Sard, 2005). Some corporate actions, accordingly, were the outcome of government fiat more than self-initiative even if industry recognised the overall need to make the destination more attractive. Less successful, though nonetheless indicative of a dynamic innovation environment and trajectory reorientation, was a short-lived ‘eco-tax’ levied on all accommodation in the early 2000s (Palmer & Riera, 2003).

Threats such as water shortages and rising sea levels still loom in Calvià, but creative destruction/reconstruction and renovation are nevertheless slowly revealing a new type of post-UMT destination seemingly in transition to SMT. Notably, it continues to identify as a mass 3S tourism city, based on unprecedented visitor numbers, the persistent dominance of package tours, and continued demand for beach and sun experiences (Aguiló et al., 2005). Other ‘mature’ resorts seem to be moving in the same direction as Calvià. Honolulu’s Waikiki neighbourhood, for example, followed a comparable post-War trajectory of haphazard development, until the creation of a special district authority in 1976 resulted in better public transit, widescale renovation, and sense of place enhancement (Sheldon & Abenjoa, 2001). The affiliated paradox in such situations is that rejuvenated destinations may well attract large numbers of additional tourists and residents whose presence increases resource consumption and stimulates further urbanisation of adjacent rural areas. Such dynamics, however, can potentially be addressed by deliberate restrictions on the expansion of infrastructure and other measures to constrain...
growth once the desired/optimum level of mass tourism has been attained.

Las Vegas and Atlantic City, often described as exemplars of unsustainable development, also indicate evolution towards SMT. As befits the more free market orientation of the USA, formal sustainability initiatives are being widely initiated at the corporate ‘grassroots’ level. Las Vegas examples include Caesars Palace (Code Green), Sands (Eco 360°), Excalibur (Green to Go), Luxor (Living Green), MGM Grand (GreenGoingGreen) and Venetian, Palazzo and Aria (all LEEDS certified). Cummings (1997) describes how the 3530-room Flamingo Hilton casino had been pursuing operational sustainability since early 1990s. Candidly captured by the Eco 360° motto ‘People, Planet, Profit’, the activities contained in all these programs, and their augmentation with ‘responsible gaming’ strategies, illustrate the dynamics of reformist and pragmatic environmentalism. Their cumulative effects on Las Vegas may be significant, and more so given their facilitation by sustainability initiatives at the municipal level (Las Vegas, 2011).

3.2. Incremental path

The incremental path is opposite to the organic path in that it involves the targeted implementation of regulations beyond the CAT stage to initially preserve, through DAT, the in situ natural and cultural assets that give the destination its unique sense of place, quality of life, and perceived competitive advantage. As with reformed mass tourism locales, such measures may attract more visitors, thereby increasing environmental and socio-cultural stress.

Counter-strategies might include official or unofficial quotas (as respectively through visitor number restrictions and higher user fees), demarketing campaigns (Beeton & Benfield, 2002), and visitor education. The actual or assumed success of such measures, and the ‘natural’ impulse to embrace growth and its expected economic benefits, results in periodic decisions to increase carrying capacity thresholds to accommodate further growth.

The incremental path is well-articulated in higher order protected areas such as World Conservation Union Category II ‘National Parks’ which are jointly mandated to preserve internal biodiversity and accommodate compatible recreation and education (IUCN, 2010). As dependency on visitor-derived revenue increases (Eagles & McCool, 2002), National Park managers often accommodate increased growth by siphoning visitation into small site-hardened zones, leaving most of the park (e.g. 95%) in a DAT-like state that attracts (for example) 5% of visitors (Lawton, 2001). This is why DAT is designated in Fig. 1 as both a transitional state (for some protected areas or destinations as a whole) and a constituent state (as part of an integrated SMT strategy of spatial differentiation).

Incremental dynamics employing variants of the 95/5 principle are evident in Grand Canyon National Park, where many of the five million annual visitors are concentrated at the South Rim visitor area, a technologically sophisticated node designed to accommodate 4200 visitors per hour in a sustainable and satisfying way during peak season (Weaver, 2006). Innovations include the use of compressed gas-powered shuttle buses to transport visitors from parking lot locations outside of park boundaries and the LEEDS conformity of new construction (National Park Service, 2011).

A smaller illustration is Galápagos National Park, where visitor numbers have been allowed to increase from under 12,000 in 1979 to 163,000 in 2009. This visitation is confined to 145 approved sites, with the number of simultaneous approved groups (maximum 16 tourists per group) at each site dictated by applicable zoning constraints. Strict behaviour rules and the presence of approved naturalist guides also help to minimise environmental costs (Galápagos, 2010).

Similar dynamics, although at a far more incipient state, describe contemporary Antarctic tourism, an industry-regulated phenomenon which has experienced exponential growth from a few hundred visitors per year in the late 1970s to around 45,000 in 2008, the vast majority concentrated at a few sites on the Antarctic Peninsula (Haase, Lamers, & Amelung, 2009). It is not being suggested here that tourism in either the Galápagos or Antarctica is currently mass tourism, but rather that a trajectory exists and is being encouraged which will probably eventuate in same, at least in some target locales.

Several small countries have pursued a deliberate incremental strategy. For Bhutan, a 1974 annual quota of 200 visitors was incrementally raised to 4000 by 1996, and more recently to 35,000 for 2010, 65,000 for 2011 and 100,000 for 2012 (personal communication, Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2010). Nightly per person tariffs were raised from US$200 to US$250 to ensure a ‘high end’ clientele, and visas were issued only to those booked with a licensed local tour operator (Bhutan, 2010).

For Dominica, a 2005 policy statement gave priority to sustainability but also supported market-driven growth based on a business model focused on private sector leadership (Dominica, 2005). The aim of doubled revenues from stayovers by 2010 was to be realised through improved airport infrastructure to accommodate more overnight visitors. Notably, such improved infrastructure can simultaneously stimulate economic development more broadly and thus contribute to improved standards of living. The revised action plan of 2010 continued to advocate a sustainable ‘growth’ model (Joseph, 2010), demonstrated in practice by a policy of compensating for stagnant stayover numbers by encouraging accelerated growth in cruise ship excursions, which increased from about 200,000 per year in the early 2000s to over 500,000 by 2010. The average of 1400 visitors per day that this represents does not necessarily constitute an environmental or socio-cultural threat to the mountainous and thickly vegetated island of 750 square kilometres if an appropriate strategy of 95/5-type concentration and dispersal is implemented.

3.3. Induced path

Butler (1980) acknowledged deviations from the destination life cycle through ‘instant resorts’ induced under government-driven growth pole strategies. Early examples from the 1970s such as Cancún (Mexico) (Torres & Momsen, 2005) and Languedoc-Roussillon (France) (Klemm, 1996), although not framed within an explicit sustainability context, were intended through rigorous planning to stimulate regional development and avoid the environmental and social problems characteristic of organic mass tourism. That such prototypes were not entirely successful, however, is demonstrated by the later experience of those planning Mexico’s Huatulco growth pole, who were said to have learned lessons from the mistakes of Cancún. Environmental sustainability, at least, is apparent in the designation of about one-half of the expropriated 21,000 ha as a National Park, but the socio-cultural outcomes with regard to the affected local residents have been more problematic (Brenner, 2005). A similar pattern of differential environmental and social outcomes is evident in the Indonesian planned resort of Bintan (Wong, 2003).

These newer induced mega-destinations have the environmental advantage of embedding comprehensive sustainability features in the design of new facilities and urban landscapes rather than incorporating them as renovations, but the inherent socio-cultural disadvantage of having to severely disrupt existing human communities to enable these designs. Thus, even where sustainability is rhetorically paramount, the existing landscape and its human imprint first have to be effectively destroyed to create...
the *tabla rasa* upon which the new sustainability prototype can arise. Distinctive ‘development’ and ‘operation’ stages follow this paradoxical stage of ‘destruction’ (or, more euphemistically, ‘preparation’), which in turn follows from the ‘planning’ stage. The Saemangeum (or Ariul) mega-project in South Korea, conceived as an exemplar of sustainable development, is envisioned as a multifunctional ecotopia focused on tourism and leisure activities and industries. However, it has attracted controversy because of the environmental and social impacts of reclaiming 300 km² of sea and estuary (KRCAC, 2010).

4. Discussion

The proposition that contemporary tourism is converging towards SMT (at least where conditions of sufficient demand and socio-economic stability are satisfied) through evolutionary means is likely to attract controversy if only because of the long held association in some academic circles between mass tourism and unsustainability. However, as in most related discourses, the focal issue will revolve around what is meant by sustainability. However, as in most related discourses, the focal issue will revolve around what is meant by ‘sustainable’. There are compelling reasons, as presented, to believe that conventional tourism businesses and their destinations will continue to move in the direction of sustainability, though for the foreseeable future in an evolutionary context of pragmatic operational environmentalism that reflects growth-friendly paradigm nudge rather than growth-hostile paradigm shift.

However, even if this is sufficient to resolve ‘intensity perspective’ issues such as congestion or waste management, the global ‘volume perspective’ issue of climate change remains a complex, existential and impending threat that many will argue can only be addressed through a transformational approach entailing radical institutional and societal innovation, including possibly the rejection of long-haul travel habits (even though the contribution of airlines to emissions is only in the order of a few percentage points). The debate over what can legitimately be designated as ‘sustainable’ then perhaps is reduced to respective support for evolution or revolution depending on how critical this issue, in particular, is deemed to be. In favour of the evolutionary approach, increased demand for air travel, as discussed above, must be assessed against reductions in per capita emissions and the increased adoption of carbon footprint mitigation strategies. Meaningful assessments of tourism-related consumption, in addition, should take into account the resources that would otherwise be consumed if these travellers remained at home.

The subsequent identification of three convergent developmental trajectories has diverse management implications depending on whether the post-CAT evolutionary impulse is initially dominated by considerations of growth (organic), regulation (incremental), or both together (induced). The dynamics of community are illustrative. In the induced path, community is initially and intentionally displaced, requiring subsequently that it be reinvented with a new and larger population. In the organic path, the integrity of community is inadvertently eroded, requiring reinvigoration in the rejuvenation stage. Community in the incremental path is empowered and then reinforced through continual adaptation for additional growth. Reinvention, reinvigoration, and reinforcement each requires distinct management strategies proceeding from the respective initial positioning of community as destroyed, weakened, or preserved. Induced displacement, for example, may be ‘softened’ through policies that give these residents priority access to employment and training in the new growth pole, whilst incremental reinforcement might involve access to new technologies and intermediaries to cope with increased visitation levels.

Geographically, the magnitude of destination usually envisioned by the induced path, and the dramatic actions required to acquire and prepare the designated area, are such that this is a relatively rare option. Northeast and Southeast Asia, host respectively to Saemangeum and Bintan, are the likely regional venues for future development given the massive growth in their domestic, inbound and outbound tourist flows, and relatively authoritarian governments willing and able to enforce domestic population transfers. The likelihood of multiple mega-developments in China is high given its recent tourism performance. Existing induced resort destinations may accordingly face greater competition than originally anticipated, possibly distracting from exemplary sustainability efforts.

In contrast, the organic option is more ubiquitous, spawning the mass tourism aggregations of the pleasure periphery as well as nodal alpine concentrations and exurban ‘tourist shopping villages’ (Getz, 1993). For other places more incipient along this path, the five pro-sustainability factors outlined above make conversion to the incremental path, and thus the avoidance of UMT, more feasible. The identification of strategies for making this shift is a laudable follow-up research directive. Concurrently, the transition to sustainability-based rejuvenation in mature locales should continue to be encouraged, capitalising on the possibility that resorts most ‘spoiled’ by poorly regulated mass tourism are also the most receptive to remedial innovation.

Finally, the incremental model will continue to dominate accessible higher order protected areas and countries like Bhutan and Dominica once implicitly committed to DAT. The prospects for individual villages, towns, counties or provinces, however, are complicated by relatively porous boundaries that inhibit formal visitor quotas or restrictions on opportunistic external investment. Options for containing growth within sustainable parameters, such as zoning, districting, development standards, restrictions on infrastructure, visitor education and user fees, must be more clearly articulated for such places (Weaver, 2006).

4.1. SMT for all destinations?

Willingness to implement pro-growth strategies cannot ensure that local attractions or accessibility are sufficient to sustain a growth trajectory from CAT or DAT to SMT and Weaver (2000a) argues that most places will persist in CAT due to low attractiveness, poor accessibility or instability. Nevertheless, the landscape of mass tourism must necessarily expand to accommodate the prospect of 10 billion tourists by 2020. Coastal and alpine areas are strongly implicated, as are metropolitan hinterlands and existing tourism cities (Weaver, 2005), locations along major highways and rivers (Prideaux & Cooper, 2009), geopolitical border areas (Timothy, 1995), protected areas, and areas of agricultural production. A qualification is that ‘mass’ tourism does not necessarily entail the absolute levels of intensity associated with Waikiki or Benidorm, but also intensity relative to local community size, as measured by host/guest ratio.

Instability also merits reassessment. Though assumed to dissaude tourism, UMT-stage instability, as argued above, may be a catalyst for pro-sustainability mobilisation. In addition, geopolitical and social instability are long-term tourism stimulants. Weaver (2000b) describes the ‘tourism war dividend’ that World War Two and the US Civil War have generated for intensely affected places such as Gettysburg and Normandy. Less intensive instability, exhibited for example by the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, also promotes mass tourism activity in otherwise obscure locations such as Robben Island (Strange & Kempe, 2003). Hence, whilst it is tempting to assert that the propositions in this paper apply only to places where sufficient levels of attractiveness and
stability are maintained, it is interesting to speculate on a future where most places are positioned as sustainable mass tourism destinations or components thereof.

5. Conclusion

This paper hopes to stimulate debate about contemporary tourism development dynamics by positioning sustainable mass tourism as an emergent and desired outcome for destinations, based on the amalgamation of the emergent norm of sustainability (which is being facilitated through at least five processes) with the entrenched norm of support for growth. It argues further that convergence towards this goal is occurring along distinct organic, incremental and induced paths that reflect evolutionary change as per the reform perspective on sustainability and its attendant environmental pragmatism. These propositions are supported by selected examples rather than a rigorous analysis of representative destinations using specific indicators and thresholds, though it is hoped that research using the latter approach will follow from this inductive paper, based on appropriate sustainability indicators and thresholds. Concurrently, 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.

References

Bhutan. (2010).


