The Myth of Sustainable Tourism

Richard Sharpley*

Introduction

The term ‘sustainable tourism’ first entered the language of tourism development policy some two decades ago. Reflecting the emergence and subsequent widespread adoption of sustainable development more generally, it was seen as an appropriate response to the challenges posed by the scale, scope and consequences of tourism development in particular. That is, since the mid-1960s, the rapid growth of tourism, particularly international mass tourism, and the inexorable global spread of the so-called ‘pleasure periphery’ (Turner & Ash 1975) had been accompanied by increasing calls for restraint in its development. Numerous commentators had drawn attention to the potentially destructive environmental and socio-cultural effects of the unbridled expansion of tourism and, by the end of the 1980s, the ‘alternative [to mass] tourism’ school was firmly established, as were concepts such as green, appropriate, low-impact, responsible and soft tourism. By the early 1990s, the attention paid to both the perceived negative impacts of tourism and to alternative approaches to its development had become re-focused through the specific lens of sustainable tourism and, since then, it has maintained a dominant position in both the academic study of tourism and in tourism policy and planning processes.

However, two points can be immediately made. Firstly, the academic study of sustainable tourism has reached something of an impasse. Despite the extensive attention paid to it over the last twenty years, there still remains a lack of consensus over not only definitions and the theoretical foundations of the concept but also the extent to which it can be translated into a set of practical policies and measures for the effective planning and management of tourism in the real world (Berno and Bricker 2001). More specifically, it is often claimed that the

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sustainable tourism debate is disjointed, theoretically flawed and based upon weak or false assumptions (Liu 2003), whilst it has long been suggested that the principles of sustainable tourism represent little more than a micro solution to a macro problem (Wheeller 1991). Secondly, there is little evidence to suggest that the principles of sustainability or sustainable development have been adopted amongst individual tourism businesses, sectors of the travel and tourism industry or, indeed, at the destinational level. Certainly, sustainable tourism remains a policy objective at the global level, enjoying, for example, specific reference in the Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development:

*Promote sustainable tourism development... in order to increase the benefit from tourism resources for the population in host communities while maintaining the cultural and environmental integrity of the host communities and enhancing the protection of ecologically sensitive areas and natural heritages.* (RWSSD 2002: 34).

However, a gulf remains between the rhetoric and academic theory of sustainable tourism and the reality of tourism development ‘on the ground’.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to argue that the concept of sustainable tourism is a myth. In other words, it argues that not only does both the academic incoherence surrounding the subject and the lack of empirical evidence of its effective implementation suggest that it is an unrealistic tourism development objective, but also that economic development (the *raison d’être* of tourism development) may in fact be hindered by adherence to the principles of sustainable tourism. The first task, however, is to review briefly the background to the emergence of sustainable tourism or, more precisely, the reasons underpinning its widespread adoption and support as an approach to tourism development, and to outline the principles of sustainable tourism before going on to consider why it may be described as a mythical concept.
Sustainable tourism: the background

Tourism, as both an economic and social activity, is frequently described as one of the major phenomena of the modern era, an assertion that reflects its remarkable growth in both scale and scope since the mid-1900s. In particular, it is the dramatic and seemingly inexorable growth of international tourism, as opposed to domestic tourism (that is, people visiting destinations within their own country), that stands out as a defining characteristic, although it is important to note that, globally, domestic tourism is significantly greater in terms of both volume and value. Worldwide, an estimated 85% of all tourism activity is domestic (Bigano et al 2007) and, consequently, the social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism (and, hence, the notion of sustainable tourism) are equal, if not greater, importance in the domestic rather than international context. Nevertheless, it is arguably the rapid and continuing growth and spread of international tourism, particularly since the 1950s, that has been the most influential factor in driving the emergence of sustainable tourism as an approach to tourism development. To a great extent, the figures speak for themselves (Table 1).

Table 1: International tourist arrivals and receipts, 1950-2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Arrivals (million)</th>
<th>Receipts (US$bn)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Arrivals (million)</th>
<th>Receipts (US$bn)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>575.0</td>
<td>446.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>598.6</td>
<td>450.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>112.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>616.7</td>
<td>451.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>165.8</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>639.6</td>
<td>464.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>222.3</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>687.0</td>
<td>481.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>278.1</td>
<td>104.4</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>686.7</td>
<td>469.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>320.1</td>
<td>119.1</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>707.0</td>
<td>488.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>439.5</td>
<td>270.2</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>694.6</td>
<td>534.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>442.5</td>
<td>283.4</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>765.1</td>
<td>634.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>479.8</td>
<td>326.6</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>806.6</td>
<td>682.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>495.7</td>
<td>332.6</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>847.0</td>
<td>742.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>519.8</td>
<td>362.1</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>903.0</td>
<td>856.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>540.6</td>
<td>410.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from UNWTO 2008; 2009

Since 1950, international tourist arrivals have grown consistently. Between 1975 and 2000, for example, the average annual growth in tourism was 4.6%, outpacing the annual growth in global GDP of 3.5% over that period and in only one year (2001, the year of “9/11”) has the total number of arrivals fallen. Between 1960 and 1990 in particular, arrivals grew in absolute terms from 69.3 million to 439.5 million, whilst tourist receipts (that is, the total amount of revenue generated by tourist spending) increased even more rapidly. Moreover, that growth in international tourism is expected to continue. The World Tourism Organisation, now known as the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), has forecast that arrivals and receipts will reach 1.6 billion and US$2 trillion respectively by 2020 (WTO 1998), figures that, despite the global economic crisis of 2008-9, seem likely to be achieved.

This remarkable growth, particularly with respect to its economic contribution, is one of the principal reasons for tourism’s almost universal adoption as an agent of development in
destination countries and regions. Indeed, its developmental role has long been ‘officially’ sanctioned, the World Tourism Organisation stating some thirty years ago that:

*World tourism can contribute to the establishment of a new international economic order that will help eliminate the widening economic gap between developed and developing countries and ensure the steady acceleration of economic and social development and progress, in particular in developing countries* (WTO 1980: 1).

Since then, many countries have embraced tourism as an integral element of their development strategies and few, if any, countries do not promote themselves as tourist destinations. The UNWTO now publishes tourism statistics for 215 states and in many countries, particularly within the less developed world, tourism has become the dominant economic sector, though frequently because it is the only realistic economic developmental option (Brown 1998). Consequently, tourism has not only grown in total volume, as evidenced in Table 1, but has also become more pervasive around the world; more than 70 countries now receive over one million international tourists annually.

To an extent, the emergence of tourism as an economic force – globally, it accounts for over 10% of GDP and around 9% of employment – is a ‘good news’ story. Moreover, the so-called ‘democratisation’ of tourism (Urry 2001), whereby ever increasing numbers of people have been able to participate in and benefit from travel and tourism, is seen by some as a kind of social victory (Krippendorf 1986). At the same time, however, as early as the 1960s, when a nascent tourism industry began to introduce packaged summer holidays to the mass markets of northern Europe, concerns over the negative consequences of the seemingly unplanned growth of tourism, manifested principally in the rapid expansion of resorts on the Spanish ‘Costas’ (Barke et al 1996), led to increasing criticism and calls for its development to be controlled or restricted (Mishan 1969; Young 1973). Subsequently, attention turned to more specific environmental, political, socio-cultural and economic consequences of tourism development and it is probably true to say that, by the 1990s, no topic concerned tourism academics, pressure groups, journalists and certain sectors of the tourism industry more than these ‘impacts of tourism’. Most frequently, criticism was, and still is, directed towards so-called mass tourism; that is, the problems associated with the development of tourism in general were considered by many to reflect the alleged ‘crisis’ of mass tourism in particular (Poon 1993). At the same time, the debate and analysis of tourism’s consequences ranged from theoretically rigorous research to apocalyptic journalism. For example, according to one critic:

*A spectre is haunting our planet: the spectre of tourism. It’s said that travel broadens the mind. Today, in its modern guise of tourism, it can also ruin landscapes, destroy communities, pollute air and water, trivialise cultures, bring about uniformity, and generally contribute to the continuing degradation of life on our planet.* (Croall 1995: 1).

A full consideration of the impacts of tourism is beyond the scope of this paper, though they are widely considered in the literature (see, for example, Wall and Mathieson 2006). The important point is, however, that the environmental, social and economic costs of tourism were increasingly seen as outweighing its developmental benefits; in other words, tourism development (particularly mass tourism) was increasingly considered to be unsustainable. Therefore, by the late 1980s, many commentators were calling for the adoption of alternative
(to mass) forms of tourism, laying the foundation for the emergence of sustainable tourism as the tourism development paradigm that was to become dominant in academic and policy circles from the early 1990s onwards.

**Sustainable tourism: objectives and principles**

As noted in the previous section, the concept of sustainable tourism owes its origins to concerns over the negative consequences of uncontrolled tourism development or, more precisely, the perceived need to develop tourism more sustainably, though whether the focus should be on making the development of tourism itself more sustainable or on achieving sustainable development through tourism remains a contested issue (Hunter 1995). In fact, this continuing debate is indicative of the inherent weakness of the concept; just as its ‘parental paradigm’, sustainable development, is widely and variously defined (Rogers et al 2008), so too has sustainable tourism been subject to diverse interpretation and multiple definitions. Indeed, despite the degree of academic attention paid to the subject over the last twenty years, the failure to achieve definitional consensus, or even an agreement over terminology, is seen by some as evidence of its inherent fallibility (Liu 2003; Twining-Ward and Butler 2002). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, it is possible to outline the broad objectives and principles of sustainable tourism.

From the outset, it was argued that tourism should be considered a ‘sustainable economic development option’ and that tourism development should be ‘compatible with the principles of sustainable development’ (Cronin 1990). In other words, sustainable tourism should be seen and implemented as a vehicle or contributor to sustainable development more generally; environmentally and socially sustainable tourism is a prerequisite to wider sustainable development, not an end in itself. Not surprisingly, perhaps, numerous definitions have since been proposed, as have specific forms of sustainable tourism, such as ecotourism, alternative tourism or responsible tourism, but contemporary definitions of sustainable tourism continue to align it closely with the broader principles of sustainable development. For example, *Making Tourism More Sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers* (UNEP/WTO 2005), explains that sustainable tourism is a ‘condition’ relevant to all forms of tourism and refers simply to tourism that is developed in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. Whether it is realistic or possible to align tourism as a specific socio-economic activity with the principles and objectives of sustainable development (itself a highly contested concept) is considered in more detail below, but an early working definition proposed by Butler continues to provides a useful description of what sustainable tourism is ‘about’:

*Tourism which is developed and maintained... in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and wellbeing of other activities and processes.* (Butler 1993: 29).

Such a definition embraces what have come to be seen as the three pillars, or ‘triple bottom line’, of sustainable development, namely economic, environmental and social sustainability, and to a lesser or greater extent these are reflected in numerous sets of principles of sustainable tourism. It is not possible here to review these in detail though, typically, it is suggested that sustainable tourism should be operationalised according to the principles summarised in Table 2 below.
Table 2: Sustainable tourism development: a summary of principles

- The conservation and sustainable use of natural, social and cultural resources is crucial. Therefore, tourism should be planned and managed within environmental limits and with due regard for the long term appropriate use of natural and human resources.
- Tourism planning, development and operation should be integrated into national and local sustainable development strategies. In particular, consideration should be given to different types of tourism development and the ways in which they link with existing land and resource uses and socio-cultural factors.
- Tourism should support a wide range of local economic activities, taking environmental costs and benefits into account, but it should not be permitted to become an activity which dominates the economic base of an area.
- Local communities should be encouraged and expected to participate in the planning, development and control of tourism with the support of government and the industry. Particular attention should be paid to involving indigenous people, women and minority groups to ensure the equitable distribution of the benefits of tourism.
- All organisations and individuals should respect the culture, the economy, the way of life, the environment and political structures in the destination area.
- All stakeholders within tourism should be educated about the need to develop more sustainable forms of tourism. This includes staff training and raising awareness, through education and marketing tourism responsibly, of sustainability issues amongst host communities and tourists themselves.
- Research should be undertaken throughout all stages of tourism development and operation to monitor impacts, to solve problems and to allow local people and others to respond to changes and to take advantages of opportunities.
- All agencies, organizations, businesses and individuals should co-operate and work together to avoid potential conflict and to optimise the benefits to all involved in the development and management of tourism.

Source: Telfer and Sharpley (2008: 43)

As is evident from Table 2, the sustainable use of natural resources and the development of tourism within physical and socio-cultural capacities are of fundamental importance, whilst consideration is given to equitable access to the benefits of tourism. The concept of futurity is also implicit within these guidelines. Moreover, the principle of community involvement appears to satisfy the specific requirements of self-reliance and endogenous development that are critical elements of the sustainable development paradigm. Nevertheless, and perhaps inevitably, these principles have tended to concentrate the focus of tourism development onto local, small-scale projects, rather than locating it within the broader context of the sustainable development of the destination as a whole. In particular, attention has been focused primarily on the preservation of the natural, built and socio-cultural resource base upon which tourism depends in specific settings, thereby permitting the longer-term ‘survival’ of tourism as an economic sector. To an extent, of course, this is sound business practice. All industries strive to maintain their resource base for longer-term survival whilst sound environmental policies may significantly enhance profitability. It does not, however, equate with sustainable development. Thus, whilst there is evidence of many successful sustainable tourism projects, these tend to be localised and small-scale; conversely, there is little or no evidence of sustainable tourism on a wider scale, hence the argument noted in the introduction to this
paper that the principles of sustainable tourism are a ‘micro solution to a macro problem’. Moreover, as the following section now suggests, the concept of sustainable tourism suffers a number of other weaknesses and contradictions that contribute to the argument that, as an approach to tourism development, it is unworkable, that it is a myth.

Sustainable tourism: challenges and problems

As discussed above, tourism has demonstrated significant and consistent growth over the last half century and, although the rate of growth has declined since the early 1990s (that is, from the time when sustainable tourism first emerged as a tourism planning and development objective), worldwide international arrivals have continued to increase at between 4% and 5% annually. At the same time, global tourism has demonstrated a number of other characteristics and trends that provide an important ‘real world’ framework for considering the validity of the sustainable tourism concept. In particular:

- The continuing growth in tourism has underpinned or, perhaps, been stimulated by the emergence of new destinations around the world. Although Europe continues to both generate and receive the highest proportion of international tourists, its share of global arrivals has been steadily falling. Conversely, the Middle East and Asia Pacific regions have enjoyed a rapid increase in the share of global arrivals whilst, in particular, a number of least developed countries have been experiencing growth rates in tourist arrivals well in excess of the global average.

- More countries are becoming important generators of international tourism. Although the main tourism generating countries remain Germany, the USA, the UK, Japan and France, much of the increase in tourist arrivals in the Asia Pacific and Middle East regions, for example, is the result of intra-regional travel underpinned by economic growth in those regions. China and Russia have also become major tourism markets, whilst India’s international travel expenditure, though still relatively small at 0.8% of global expenditure, grew by a remarkable 70% between 2002 and 2004.

- Significant factors in the continued growth of tourism, beyond economic growth in tourism generating countries, have been the related influences of the liberalisation of international air transport and the emergence of low-cost airlines, particularly within Europe where increased freedom of movement of labour has also contributed to a growth in intra-regional tourism.

- There has been increasing dependence upon tourism as an agent of economic development. Within the developed world, peripheral or economically disadvantaged regions are increasingly focusing on tourism as a means of stimulating economic and social regeneration whilst, for many less developed countries, tourism has come to represent a vital ingredient of their development policies.

- There has been limited evidence of an increase in ‘responsible’ tourist behaviour. In other words, one of the fundamental assumptions underpinning the concept of sustainable tourism is that there has been an increase in environmental concern on the part of tourists and, hence, growing demand for ‘responsible’ or sustainable travel experiences. However, research has consistently demonstrated that tourism is relatively immune to environmental concerns; despite the long-held belief that tourists
are demanding ‘greener’ holidays, the evidence suggests that environmental concern remains low on their list of priorities when purchasing holiday or travel experiences.

Collectively, these points suggest that, despite the rhetoric of sustainable tourism, international tourism has continued to grow with little, if any, evidence of adherence to the principles of sustainable development, whether from the perspective of tourist consumer behaviour, business practice within the tourism sector or tourism planning and development at the destinational or national level. Whether this is indicative of weaknesses in the concept of sustainable tourism is unclear but, undoubtedly, there is a variety of both general and specific factors that limit its practical viability.

**Sustainable tourism: general issues**

Generally, the broader paradigm of sustainable development can, according to Robinson (2004), be challenged under three headings which are equally relevant to a critique of sustainable tourism in particular.

- **Vagueness / ambiguity**: sustainable development is not only vague in terms of meaning and definition; it is also semantically ambiguous. Does it mean development that can be sustained, thereby giving precedence to development, or development restricted by environmental sustainability limits? Such vagueness is not necessarily a problem, although it does give rise to a number of fundamental questions, including: what should be developed sustainably (personal wealth, national wealth, human society, ecological diversity)? Against what baseline can sustainable development be measured? Who is responsible for sustainable development? And, under what political-economic conditions is sustainable development viable? The same questions may be asked about tourism development in particular, whilst the vagueness of the concept means it can be appropriated in different ways by different stakeholders: ‘The private tourism industry views it largely in economic and marketing terms. How can the tourism market be sustained and grow in the long term? The local community may see it in terms of socio-economic benefits and cultural preservation… An environmental NGO would present more of an ecological perspective. How can tourism help to sustain, rather than mar, natural systems?’ (USAID 2005: 5).

- **Hypocrisy**: sustainable development language or eco-speak may be used to disguise unsustainable activities through what is now referred to as ‘greenwashing’. Products, services and other activities may have green or eco-labels attached to them (ecotourism being an obvious example), yet their environmental credentials may be difficult to identify or measure. On the one hand, such greenwashing may serve to assuage the environmental ‘guilt’ of consumers; tourists may feel more ‘responsible’ by going on ecotours, for example, whether or not such holidays are genuinely ‘green’ (Robbins 2008). On the other hand, as Robinson (2004) suggests, the challenge of hypocrisy has stimulated the development of sustainability indicators (see WTO 1993) and accreditation schemes, a number of which exist for tourism at the national and international levels.

- **Delusions**: According to Robinson (2004), the most significant criticism of sustainable development is that it fosters delusions, in two particular ways. The first relates to the oxymoronic character of the concept, inasmuch as it provides a framework for continued development under the possibly misguided belief that such development can
occur within biophysical limits, either through efficiencies or technological advance. Thus, a continuing focus on ‘sustainable’ growth and development may simply hasten ecological collapse, an argument which is of direct relevance to tourism. Secondly, he suggests that sustainable development, as currently conceptualised, may ‘distract us from the real problems and potential solutions by focussing our attention on the wrong issues’ (Robinson 2004). Sustainable tourism development may, in this sense, be delusional. That is, the ‘problem’ of tourism may not lie in the mis-management or excessive exploitation of resources; in fact, tourism may not be a problem at all, but a symptom of a more deep-rooted issue, namely: the state of contemporary modern societies that encourages people to in greater numbers an ever more frequently. Equally, the problem may not be the overall global growth of tourism, but inequitable shares of the benefits of tourism. For example, despite enjoying above average growth in arrivals in recent years, less developed countries still collectively account for roughly just one thirds of total tourist arrivals and receipts.

In addition to these general issues, sustainable development is considered by some to be a contradictory manifestation of Western hegemony. As Adams (2001: 108) observes, ‘mainstream sustainable development is firmly anchored within the existing economic paradigms of the industrialised North’, yet it is the dominance of western economic models that contemporary perspectives on human development seek to challenge. A similar accusation may be levelled at sustainable tourism. In a powerful critique, Cater (2006) describes ecotourism (as a specific nature-based form of sustainable tourism) as a Western construct: ‘There is a lot to suggest that, because the origins of ecotourism lie in Western ideology and values, and its practice is frequently dominated by Western interests, the advocacy of ecotourism as a universal template arises from Western hegemony’ (Cater 2006). Though she focuses specifically on ecotourism, the points Cater raises are of direct relevance to sustainable tourism more generally. In particular, she cites the role and influence of the UNWTO, its ‘blueprints’ for sustainable tourism, and the funding of local ecotourism projects by organisations such as the World Bank’s Global Environmental Facility or Conservation International based upon an explicitly Western development agenda.

At the same time, the design of ecotourism (and, implicitly, sustainable tourism) projects based upon the mainstream conservation-for-development perspective and Western notions of nature fails to account for alternative natures or, more broadly, alternative environments and interpretations of conservation and guardianship. In other words, different natures and environments are, in essence, the product of socio-cultural, political and economic processes and, thus, sustainable tourism / ecotourism development constructed on Western-centric interpretations of nature may not match local constructs of nature, with the result that tourism may be seen as a form of eco-colonialism. This also points to the more general criticism of sustainable tourism that its principles and objectives are typically manifested in overarching sets of prescriptive guidelines, usually based upon managing the limits (according to Western criteria) of acceptable environmental and social change, that fail to account for the almost infinite diversity of tourism development contexts and, importantly, the meaning, knowledge and understanding of those environments amongst local communities.

**Sustainable tourism: specific issues**

With regards to weaknesses and challenges specifically related to the sustainable tourism concept, a number of issues have already been highlighted or hinted at. In particular, and firstly, the principles for sustainable tourism development, and sustainable tourism projects in
practice, tend to be manifested in local, small-scale projects. Whilst these may be successful as far as they go, small-scale projects bring, by implication, only small-scale benefits and address the ‘problems’ of tourism at only the local level. Thus, not only is the ‘macro’ problem of tourism effectively ‘brushed under the carpet’, but the objective of achieving sustainable development through tourism, as discussed in more detail shortly, is unachievable.

Secondly, and related, most sustainable tourism principles and projects focus on the supply of tourism at the destination, with little account taken of potential transformations in the demand for tourism. That is, sustainable tourism requires sustainable demand yet, as is widely recognised, tourism is a fickle activity that is highly susceptible to a variety of influences, such as economic downturns, health or security scares, political turmoil or even fashion. Thirdly, the ‘blueprint’ character of most sustainable tourism policies fail to recognise local (destinational) variations in terms of both local community developmental needs and local opportunities for tourism development.

It should also be noted that, as has long been recognised, tourism is not a ‘smokeless’ industry. That is, the development or ‘production’ of tourism may result in significant environmental and social impacts for destinations. To an extent, such impacts are inevitable and, more contentiously, should be both expected and accepted by destination communities – it could be argued that for destinations to seek the economic benefits of tourism whilst expecting tourists to behave ‘responsibly’ (in the broader sense of responsible tourism) is a case of having one’s cake and eating it. Nevertheless, effective management of the development of tourism may be necessary to contain its negative consequences within acceptable (sustainable) limits.

However, it is in the context of its relationship with sustainable development that the notion of sustainable tourism is weakest. In other words, sustainable tourism is considered to be tourism that is developed in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. However, if the characteristics of tourism as both an economic and social activity are mapped against the fundamental elements of sustainable development, it become evident that there is a lack of ‘fit’ between the two concepts (see Table 3). In other words, the development of tourism is unable to meet sustainable development’s fundamental principles, nor its development and sustainability principles. This lack of fit between tourism and sustainable development is discussed in detail elsewhere (Sharpley 2000, 2009; Telfer and Sharpley 2008), but may be summarised as follows:
**Table 3: Sustainable development and tourism: principles and objectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainable Development</th>
<th>Tourism Compatibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fundamental principles:</strong></td>
<td>Tourism is a diverse, multi-sectoral and fragmented sector, comprising innumerable small business and organisations. Hence, limited possibilities for an holistic approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic approach: development and environmental issues integrated within a global social, economic and ecological context.</td>
<td>Tourism businesses typically focus on short-term profit objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futurity: focus on long-term capacity for continuance of the global ecosystem, including the human sub-system.</td>
<td>Access to tourism m as a social activity and an economic sector remains inequitable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity: development that is fair and equitable and which provides opportunities for access to and use of resources for all members of all societies, both in the present and future.</td>
<td>Tourism brings potential economic benefits; broader developmental benefits are not an inevitable outcome of tourism, and are dependent on local socio-cultural and political-economic conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Development objectives:</strong></td>
<td>Ecotourism projects may contribute to basic needs and cultural sustainability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
<td>Low compatibility between tourism and development goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement of the quality of life for all people: education, life expectancy, opportunities to fulfil potential</td>
<td>Specific programmes (pro-poor tourism) may be targeted at specific groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction of basic needs; concentration on the nature of what is provided rather than income.</td>
<td>Local projects may minimise resource depletion and enhance environmental conservation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reliance: political freedom and local decision making for local needs.</td>
<td>Tourism (i.e. travel) will inevitably be a major contributor of greenhouse gases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endogenous development</td>
<td>Limited evidence of ‘responsible’ tourism consumption in practice. ‘Tourists are consumers, not anthropologists’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustainability objectives:</strong></td>
<td>Some evidence of ‘corporate social responsibility’ and environmental programmes within some organisations: also benchmarking schemes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poverty reduction</td>
<td>Limited opportunities for global alliances or global systems equitable access to and distribution of tourism resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable population levels.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimal depletion of non-renewable natural resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainable use of renewable resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pollution emissions within the assimilative capacity of the environment</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Requirements for sustainable development:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainable consumption: Adoption of a new social paradigm relevant to sustainable living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainable production: Biodiversity conservation; technological systems that can search continuously for new solutions to environmental problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainable distribution: International and national political and economic systems dedicated to equitable development and resource use.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Global alliance facilitating integrated development policies at local, national and international levels.</td>
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</table>

Source: adapted from Telfer and Sharpley (2008: 36)
Holistic approach: all tourism development should be considered within a global socioeconomic, political and ecological context; that is, all elements of the tourism experience should be sustainable. However, given the breadth of the tourism system and the fragmented, multi-sectoral character of the tourism industry, such an approach is not realistic or viable. More specifically, the unsustainability of most forms of transport not only represents a fundamental challenge to sustainable tourism (Høyer 2000), but is of particular relevance to contemporary debates surrounding climate change (Becken and Hay 2007).

Futurity: the tourism industry primarily comprises small, private sector, profit-motivated businesses. Therefore, it is likely that most businesses are more concerned with short-term profit considerations rather than the long-term sustainable development of the destination.

Equity: although tourism development by no means leads inevitably to destination dependency, the structure, ownership and control of the tourism industry on a global scale, as well as the regionalised and polarised nature of international tourist flows, suggests that inter- and intra-generational equity is unlikely to be achieved through tourism. Moreover, the tourism system within destinations or countries also tends to be dominated by the local élite, restricting equitable access to the benefits of tourism.

Development and sustainability objectives: although tourism has long been considered an effective means of achieving development, ‘development’ in the tourism context usually means traditional economic growth and development rather than the more contemporary interpretations of its objectives. Indeed, as suggested in the final section of this paper below, recognising and accepting tourism as an economic, capitalist phenomenon provides an alternative basis for exploring ways of developing tourism to meet local destination developmental and environmental parameters. In other words, tourism undoubtedly plays a vital economic role as a source of income, foreign exchange and employment; less certain, however, is the extent to which broader (sustainable) developmental goals, such as the satisfaction of basic needs, self-reliance and endogenous development, can be achieved through tourism.

At the same time, the extent to which sustainability objectives are achievable within the tourism context remains questionable. As with all industries and economic sectors, resource sustainability in tourism is dependent upon all sectors involved directly and indirectly in the tourism industry working towards common goals and, although different organisations and industry sectors have, to a lesser or greater extent, adopted environmental management policies, sustainability in tourism will only be achieved when the industry as a whole accepts the need for such policies. In particular, the achievement of sustainability in tourism is dependent upon a number of prerequisites, in particular the adoption of a new ‘social paradigm’ regarding the consumption of tourism or, more simply stated, the need for all tourists to become ‘good’ or ‘responsible’ tourists. However, as already noted, there is little or no evidence of widespread ‘responsible’ tourism whilst, as Porritt (2007) concedes, the greatest challenge to sustainability more generally remains the need to transform contemporary levels and patterns of consumption.

Towards more sustainable tourism

If sustainable tourism as currently conceived is indeed a myth, is there an alternative approach to ensuring that tourism development meets both destination needs and environmental
parameters? To put it another way, if it can be accepted that tourism is, first and foremost, an economic activity or, more broadly, a form of capitalist endeavour (tourism businesses and destinations employ a variety of capitals to produce products – that is, tourism services and experiences – that are sold for a profit), and that environmental / resource sustainability is a prerequisite to the continuation of that endeavour and, hence, profits, is there a way of ensuring that sustainability?

As argued more fully elsewhere (Sharpley 2009), the solution may lie in the concept of destination capitals. That is, all tourist destinations possess to a greater or lesser extent a variety of capitals, such as environmental capital, human capital, socio-cultural capital, economic capital and political capital. These capitals may be exploited by the destination in ways which meet the need for environmental sustainability (as defined by the destination), which reflect local developmental objectives and which take advantage of opportunities offered by the external market (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1: A destination capitals model of tourism development**

![Destination Capitals Model](image)

**Source:** Sharpley (2009: 181)

A detailed discussion of this model is beyond the scope of this final section of this chapter. Importantly, however, it places the focus of tourism planning and environmental sustainability firmly in the context of the individual destination, rather than subordinating it to an overarching (and, as suggested in this chapter) unworkable blueprint for sustainable tourism. As a consequence, destinations may exploit their capitals in ways which optimise the economic benefits of tourism according to local needs (for example, generating foreign exchange, enhancing employment opportunities, attracting international investment, generating government revenues, and so on) at the same time maintaining their capital base (including environmental capital) for the future. This, in turn, suggests that destinations may
develop forms of tourism (including ‘traditional’ mass tourism) that do not perhaps meet the criteria proposed by the principles of sustainable tourism but nevertheless provide a more realistic, viable approach to tourism development.

References


