

## The COVID-19 Crisis, Tourism and Sustainable Development

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*This paper explores some of the relationships between tourism and sustainable development through the lens of the COVID-19 crisis. The paper provides an outline of the COVID-19 crisis, and explores some of the relationships between tourism and sustainable development as illuminated by the COVID-19 crisis. The paper suggests that the COVID-19 crisis has not only posed a range of major challenges for the tourist industry but that it has also signaled some environmental changes that may be central to the transition to a more sustainable future, highlighted some of the inherent contradictions and complexities within the concept of sustainable development, and suggested some radical solutions to the challenges of sustainability. This is not an empirical paper, rather it rehearses some of the arguments about the relationships between the tourism industry and sustainability and draws on the views and opinions of a number of authorities on sustainable development within the industry. As such, the paper offers an accessible review of some of the relationships between tourism and sustainable development at a very testing time for the industry.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, crisis, tourism, sustainable development, corporate sustainability

### Introduction

COVID-19 has been described by Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, as "*a crisis like no other*" (World Economic Forum 2020) and it certainly had had a devastating impact on both the global economy and on sectoral economies. Segal (2020), for example, writing under the banner of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, claimed "*at the sectoral level, tourism and travel-related industries will be among the hardest hit as authorities encourage social distancing and consumers to stay indoors.*" The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2020) reported that "*the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 has brought the world to a standstill,*" and claimed that "*tourism has been the worst affected of all major economic sectors.*" More specifically, Zurab Pololikashvili, Secretary-General of the UNWTO (2020) has argued "*the sudden and unexpected fall in tourism demand caused by COVID-19 places millions of jobs and livelihoods at risk while at the same time jeopardising the advances made in sustainable development and equality over recent years.*"

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The initial formal definition of sustainable development namely, "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) is still widely used over three decades after it was framed. That said, the concept has been extended to more fully recognise its environmental, social and economic dimensions, to embrace equity across geographical space, as well as over time, to incorporate business imperatives as part of corporate sustainability strategies, and to encompass a wide range of human endeavours and environmental events.

More specifically, the concept of sustainable development has attracted attention from tourism scholars. Hall et al. (2015), for example, claimed that sustainable tourism "*has been incorporated into the fabric of academic discourse in academic, business and governance terms.*" Ural (2015) suggested that "*the magnitude of disaster/catastrophic risks has become a major topic of discussion for a sustainable tourism.*" That said, work in this genre has traditionally been focussed on national economies or local environments. de Sausmarez (2007), for example, writing under the banner "*Crisis Management, Sustainability and Tourism,*" argued that "*the damage to tourism caused by a crisis or disaster may not only have serious implications for a national economy but also threaten the livelihoods of many in the destination.*" However, the COVID-19 crisis has posed a wide range of major challenges for tourism throughout the world and it has taken the tourism industry into uncharted waters.

With these thoughts in mind this paper explores some of the relationships between tourism and sustainable development through the lens of the COVID-19 crisis. The paper describes the features of the COVID-19 crisis, outlines some of the environmental, economic and social and impacts of the crisis, examines the consequences of the crisis for corporate sustainability programmes in the tourism industry and explores some of the inherent contradictions within the concept of sustainable development highlighted by the crisis. This is not an empirical paper, rather it rehearses some of the arguments about the relationships between tourism and sustainable development and draws on the views and opinions of a number of authorities on sustainable development within the tourism industry. The paper was written in May 2020, while both the authors were in lockdown, and as such, to adopt a military metaphor, it offers a view from the battlefield, at a time when the tourism industry seemed under siege.

### **The COVID-19 Crisis**

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a newly discovered coronavirus. Coronaviruses are part of a large family of viruses that can affect birds and mammals, including humans. In recent years, this family of viruses has been responsible for several disease outbreaks around the world, including Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2002-2003 and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome first reported in South Korea in 2012. COVID-19 primarily affects the

lungs and airways leading to mainly respiratory symptoms, e.g., cough and shortness of breath, and fevers. The majority of people with COVID-19 experience mild symptoms of the disease and recover without requiring specialist treatment. However older people, and those with underlying medical problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease and those with a weakened immune system are more likely to develop serious illness and are at an increased risk of dying from the disease.

The disease can spread from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth which are spread when a person with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes or exhales. These droplets land on objects and surfaces around the person. Other people then catch COVID-19 by touching these objects or surfaces, then touching their eyes, nose or mouth. People can also catch COVID-19 if they breathe in droplets from a person with COVID-19 who coughs, sneezes or exhales droplets. Precise details of the origins and initial spread of COVID-19 are hard to confirm, but there is some agreement that the disease originated in a wholesale market in Wuhan, a city of some 11 million people, in Eastern China, and that some of the market traders may have contracted the disease following contact with animals at the market.

On 31 December 2019, China alerted the World Health Organisation to several cases of unusual pneumonia in Wuhan, and several of those infected, worked at one of the city's markets. Early in 2020 the disease spread rapidly, first to other regions of China, and eventually to the majority of the world's countries, and the World Health Organisation declared the global outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Though the nature of the response to the crisis has varied from one country to another, all medical authorities and governments have struggled to combat COVID-19. Medical pressures included providing large numbers of bed spaces and specialist equipment to treat seriously ill patients, sufficient numbers of, and personal protection equipment for, medical staff, and adequate testing facilities. The policies adopted by many governments have centred on enforcing social distancing by strongly recommending restrictions on the movement of people, popularly described as lockdown, and instructing many businesses to close down, in an attempt to prevent the spread of the disease.

The COVID-19 crisis has certainly had a wide range of environmental, economic and social consequences and as such has had a major impact on sustainable development. At the same time, the crisis has identified the need to extend the scope of sustainable development. Here there is the issue of the role of sustainable development in preventing future pandemics, as such events, thankfully relatively rare as they are, have not been included in traditional approaches to sustainability. Di Marco et al. (2020) observed that *"little attention has been paid to the interactions between environmental change and infectious disease emergence"* and such interactions are *"not customarily integrated into planning for sustainable development."* More specifically, Di Marco et al. (2020) claimed that the emergence of diseases *"is driven by anthropogenic changes such as deforestation and expansion of agricultural land (i.e. land-use change), intensification of livestock production, and increased hunting and trading of wildlife."* Looking to the

future, Di Marco et al. (2020) claimed that human health could be more effectively integrated within sustainable development planning but argued this required "*a cross-disciplinary research approach*," which would involve "*socioeconomic change, pathogen dynamics, and biological and behavioral aspects of humans, wildlife, and livestock*."

### **Environmental, Economic and Social Impacts**

The relationship between tourism and sustainable development, as illuminated by the COVID-19 crisis, can be seen in a number of ways. Initially, a number of environmental improvements were identified including marked reductions in pollution levels and greenhouse gas emissions, following the closure of many power generation plants and factories, the dramatic fall in the volume of air travel and the restrictions on the movement of people in motor vehicles. However, such improvements will surely not be maintained if/when the economy recovers. Inger Anderson, Head of the United Nations Environment Programme, for example, was reported as arguing "*we need to take on board the environmental signals and what they mean for our future and wellbeing because COVID-19 is by no means a silver lining for the environment*," that "*visible positive impacts—whether through improved air quality or reduced greenhouse gas emissions—are but temporary because they come on the back of tragic economic slowdown and human distress*" (United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs 2020).

While the COVID-19 crisis has brought some general environmental gains, it has also had a devastating economic and social impact. Within Europe, for example, Neisdadt (2020), writing in April 2020 under the banner of the European Parliament Research Service, estimated that the tourism industry within the European Union was losing Euro 1 billion per month as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. More specifically, Neisdadt (2020) suggested that "*the situation is particularly difficult in several European Union countries that are key tourist destinations, such as Italy, Spain and France*." Overall, Statista (2020) estimated that 1.6 million jobs were at risk in the tourism sector in Germany due to the COVID-19 crisis, while the corresponding figures for Russia, Italy, Spain, France and Portugal were 1.1 million, 1 million, 0.8 million, 0.8 million and 0.3 million, respectively.

More widely, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), for example, reported on the impact of COVID-19 on the global tourism industry, noting that, "*many tourism dependent countries rely heavily on tourist arrivals from a particular country—the United States, for example—as in the case of many Caribbean countries. These economies would experience sharp increases in unemployment rates affecting the livelihood of low-skilled workers and the more vulnerable segments of society that depend on income from tourism-related activities*." In an assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on international tourism dated 24 March 2020, the UNWTO (2020) cautioned that given "*the unparalleled and fast-evolving nature of the crisis, it is extremely challenging to*

*estimate the impact of COVID-19 on international tourism*" but estimated that "international tourist arrivals could decline by 20% to 30% in 2020." Further the UNWTO (2020) suggested that this would translate into a loss of US \$300 to \$450 billion in international tourism receipts. More pessimistically, in April 2020, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2020) estimated that the decline in international tourism in 2020 could be between 45% and 70%, depending on when recovery begins to take place, and warned that the general economic decline due to the COVID-19 crisis will also delay recovery within the tourism industry.

OECD (2020) has argued that the COVID-19 crisis, is "*first and foremost, a humanitarian crisis affecting people's lives*" and that "*this has very tangible impacts for the tourism sector, which is critical for many people, places and businesses.*" Further, OECD (2020) argued that tourism "*directly supports numerous types of jobs and businesses and underpins many local communities,*" that it is "*a leading job creator, and in normal circumstances can help provide diverse employment opportunities for many low skilled immigrants, women, students and older workers*" particularly "*in remote, rural, coastal and other often economically fragile locations where alternative opportunities may be limited.*"

The COVID-19 crisis has clearly had damaging economic and social consequences for sustainable development within many countries where tourism is an important element in the economy. In some European countries, governments have put measures in place in an attempt to prevent permanent redundancies and avoid job losses but many tourism businesses, and companies which service tourism businesses, are run by independent self-employed workers and their families and are often not eligible for government support packages. More widely, outside of Europe and more specifically in many small less developed countries, such as the Maldives, the Seychelles, Grenada and St Kitts and Nevis, for example, where tourism accounts for over 50% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The magnitude of direct, and more significantly indirect, job losses, in tourism caused by the COVID-19 crisis has been much greater. In some of these countries, economic activity is much more informal and millions of people hit by the COVID-19 crisis, have no other income to support themselves and their families and they, and their families, have been thrown into the poverty abyss. Such problems have almost certainly considerably set back the course of economic and social sustainable development in many parts of the world.

### **Corporate Sustainability Programmes**

In recent years, corporate sustainability has assumed increasing importance within the business community, and many of the leading players in the tourism industry have pursued sustainability programmes designed to incorporate environmental, social, economic and governance issues into their business strategies. (e.g., Jones et al. 2014). However, COVID-19 poses a number of challenges for such programmes. On the one hand, such challenges may involve the

need to respond to both investors' demands and as well as to changes in customers' tourism behaviours. Investors' demands may include promoting long term reductions in tourism companies' carbon emissions and pollution levels, greater employment of renewable energy resources, a clearer commitment to waste recycling and the development of circular economy principles. At the same time public health concerns, and continuing government restrictions on international travel, may be reflected in changing tourism behaviour with people choosing to take holidays within their own countries rather than to travel abroad. All of these changes may, in turn, effectively force changes in the conventional business models of many of companies in the tourism industry.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 crisis will surely reduce the availability of, and access to, capital and this may, in turn, see available financial resources being targeted on essential core business activities. At the corporate level, extensive, high profile and costly marketing campaigns designed, for example, to promote tour packages and ocean and river cruises, and to re-engage with previous customers, and investment to try to ensure that returning customers are provided with high quality experiences, may well take precedence over environmental and social agendas within corporate sustainability programmes. At the operational level, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of greater attention being given, to basic hygiene and cleaning operations, to routine health care screening for travellers and patrons and to a greater focus on the provenance of food sourcing throughout the supply chain. At the same time, employees should be able to access regular health checks, and businesses within the tourism industry may be advised to maintain a wider welfare brief on their employees. Such measures come at a cost but they may prove important in helping to maintain a healthy workforce and regain consumer confidence and in offering a source of competitive advantage in what is likely to be an increasingly challenging marketplace.

Following the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2016, some of the leading companies within the tourism industry have responded positively to the United Nations call for businesses to rise to the challenges and opportunities they presented. While a number of trade organisations within the tourism industry argued that tourism companies can play a major role in contributing to the SDGs, Jones and Comfort's (2019) exploratory review of the world's leading hotel groups revealed varying levels of enthusiasm for these ambitious targets. More generally in discussing the role of the private sector in contributing to the SDGs, Scheyvens et al. (2016) claimed "*there is a clash between the dominant business model, which is based upon short term planning with a narrow focus on finances, and a longer term sustainable development agenda*" and specifically within the tourism industry they suggested that this "*is not good for sustainable, responsible destination planning, and rather it can actively undermine the wellbeing and sustainable development of destination communities.*"

Given such existing concerns, it remains to be seen how the COVID-19 crisis will impact upon the tourism industry's commitments to the SDG's and the situation is, at best, uncertain. On the one hand, companies may well argue that it is only by re-opening their businesses and returning to something approaching

business as normal, will they have the strength and resources and be in a position to continue to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs during the next decade. In the medium term, this may encourage large companies to push back their existing commitments to the SDGs. On the other hand, in those areas of the less developed world where the need for many of the SDG's, focused for example, on the eradication of poverty and hunger, on the widespread availability of clean water and sanitation, and on the promotion of gender equality, are greatest, many of the limited gains made since 2015 may well have been lost in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Such concerns are surely heightened at a time when the Sustainable Development Solutions Network/Institute for European Environmental Policy (2019) reported that none of the countries within the European Union, let alone the less developed world, were on track to meet their SDG targets.

### **Contradictions and Complexities**

More generally, the COVID-19 crisis has served to highlight some of the contradictions and complexities of sustainable development. On the one hand, there are inherent tensions within the concept as illustrated by the contrasts between the environmental benefits and the wide ranging economic and social costs of the COVID-19 crisis. On the other hand, there are tensions between economic forces and both environmental and social goals illustrated by some of the leading tourist companies' commitments to sustainable development. In concluding their review of the sustainability programmes being pursued by the world's leading hotel groups, Jones et. al 2014, for example, argued that "*the global hotel industry's commitments to sustainability have been developed within existing capitalist business models which are focused on continuing economic growth.*" Here, Liverman's (2018) concerns that "*growth goals cannot be met without sacrificing many environmental ones or that sustainability cannot be achieved under the current economic model of capitalism*" might be seen to resonate.

At the same time, Kumar (2020) Chief Environmental Economist, United Nations Environment Programme, was reported as arguing "*the emergence of COVID-19 has underscored the mutually-affective relationship between people and nature,*" that "*we must try to understand and appreciate the limits to which humans can push nature, before the impact is negative,*" and that "*those limits must be embraced by our consumption and production aspiration.*" In many ways sustainable consumption is elusive, it has no generally agreed definition, and in many ways, it is also a contradiction in terms. Indeed, sustainable consumption has been described as "*the most obdurate challenge for the sustainable development agenda*" (Cohen 2005), while the European Environment Agency (2020) described "*unsustainable consumption*" as "*the mother of all environmental issues.*" More specifically, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation and the United Nations Environment Programme (2020) suggested that "*unsustainable consumption and production practices represent one of the major barriers to*

*sustainable development*" but suggested that *"the concept of sustainable consumption and production is not commonly used by tourism policy makers."*

Increased affluence is generally seen to be one of the drivers of the growth of tourism, which people can enjoy, and arguably more importantly can afford, when they have access to the financial resources to enable them to meet what might be seen as the basic human needs of food, clothing and shelter. As tourism has become more accessible to seemingly ever larger numbers of people, this, in turn, has led to increasing demands on the earth's natural resources. In many ways, the concept of sustainable development provides a testing paradox within the tourism industry. On the one hand, the tourism industry increasingly looks to celebrate its commitment to sustainable development. Royal Caribbean Cruises (2019) for example, reported *"oceans are 71% of the planet and 100% critical to our business. Conserving their health is paramount. Our 2020 environmental goals set ambitious and measurable sustainability targets to reduce our environmental footprint and raise awareness about ocean conservation."*

On the other hand, the headline accent is often on conspicuous consumption, which, in many ways, is the antithesis of sustainability. Such a focus on conspicuous consumption within the tourism industry is perhaps most clearly epitomised in ocean cruising. Royal Caribbean Cruises (2016) one of the two market leaders described its ship "Freedom of the Seas," as *"the ultimate in luxury."* The vessel, which can accommodate 4,375 passengers, offered a main dining room with full waitress service as well as "Chops Grille," described *"as a high-end grill where you'll find the likes of filet mignon and mesquite-grilled salmon on a menu that changes daily"* (Royal Caribbean Cruises 2016). Carnival Corporation, the other market leader, claimed to be able to *"provide our guests with virtually endless holiday choices"* (Carnival Corporation 2016). Williams and Ponsford (2009) captured the paradox in drawing attention to what they described as *"tourism's environmental paradox"* in that tourism simultaneously seeks often fragile and sensitive environmental resources as *"core ingredients and compelling backdrops for the production and consumption of tourist experiences"* and *"it also requires the protection of the ecological integrity and abundance of these resources for sustained competitiveness."*

However, the COVID-19 crisis has opened a window on what some advocates see as a more sustainable world. In acknowledging *"we are now struggling to anticipate the impacts of COVID-19"* as *"major financial markets are gyrating and international supply chains are in turmoil,"* Cohen (2020), for example, pointed out that *"while the present situation is being treated as an emergent economic crisis, it merits acknowledging that sustainability scientists and policy makers have implicitly been seeking to achieve over the past decade broadly similar objectives in the form of a sustainable consumption transition."* Further, Cohen (2020) argued *"while it may seem fanciful and insolent, COVID-19 is an opportunity to reduce over the longer term the prevalence of lifestyle premised on large volumes of energy and material throughput"* and concludes *"policy makers should work to ensure that the coronavirus outbreak contributes to a sustainable consumption transition."* Such a transition would demand major changes in the current business

model of the vast majority of large companies in the tourism industry. At the present time, neither the majority of companies in the tourist industry, nor their customers, seem likely to take such an opportunity, or to have much enthusiasm for policy makers who advocate such a future.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to explore some of the relationships between tourism and sustainable development through the lens of the COVID-19 crisis. The COVID-19 crisis has not only posed a range of complex challenges for tourist businesses but it has also exposed some new perspectives in the relationships between tourism and sustainable development. Looking forwards, it remains to be seen what the future holds, and how these relationships will be played out. On the one hand, the hope is for a return to some sort of normality, though, at the time of writing, the time scale and the extent, of such a return remains very uncertain. However, within such a scenario, many businesses within the tourism industry, and their customers, may effectively look to pick up where they left off, as part of a much wider post COVID-19 crisis recovery. Here government and corporate sustainability programmes may effectively be put on hold as capital resources are focused on economic recovery. On the other hand, the COVID-19 crisis has opened a window on some of the relationships between tourism and sustainable development, it has signalled some environmental changes that may be central to a transition to a more sustainable future, it has highlighted some of the inherent contradictions and complexities within the concept of sustainable development and it has offered some radical solutions to the challenges of sustainability. Whether tourism businesses, large and small, or the vast majority of their customers, will want to recognise the significance of such signals and have any genuine enthusiasm for such solutions remains very much to be seen.

The authors recognise that the paper has its limitations, not least that it draws exclusively on secondary sources drawn from the Internet. This reflects the reality that both the authors were in lockdown, and that for a number of reasons, traditional avenues of empirical research were not open to them. Nevertheless, the authors believe that the paper offers an important snap shot in time of the impact of COVID-19 on the relationship between tourism and sustainable development and provides a valuable platform for future research. Looking to the future, a number of conceptual and research issues merit the attention of tourism scholars. In addressing the continuing importance of developing and refining conceptual frameworks connecting nature and society, two sets of issues merit attention.

In addressing the continuing importance of developing and refining conceptual frameworks connecting nature and society, two sets of issues merit attention. Firstly, for those scholars who have drawn on stakeholder theory to conceptualise sustainability, the COVID-19 crisis certainly emphasises the need to integrate the interests of a wider range of stakeholders including, all employees, customers and society at large to provide a more comprehensive theoretical approach to

sustainable development. Secondly, some the relationships between the tourism industry and sustainable development exposed by the COVID-19 crisis, seem valuable in informing to a more critical theory of sustainability, which seeks to locate sustainable development within wider economic, social and political structures. While stakeholder theory has been widely employed to explore sustainable development within the tourism industry, very limited attention has been given to more critical conceptual approaches. This is perhaps not altogether surprising given the, often close, working and professional relationships between many tourism scholars and an industry which is committed to growth, and where radical ideas have a limited constituency. Nevertheless, this is certainly a lacuna which merits future research.

At the empirical level, there are a wide range of research opportunities across a range of sub disciplines but three simple examples serve to illustrate the potential scope for work on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on sustainable development within the tourism industry. In marketing, for example, market research designed to explore consumers' attitudes to a range of tourism activities and destinations at both a local and an international level, will shed light on if, and how, such customers are changing their behaviours in the light of the COVID-19 crisis. Research might also focus on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the management of supply chains within the tourism industry and perhaps more specifically on the issue of provenance within the food supply chain. Research into how information and communication technologies are being employed to help to address continuing customer safety concerns would also seem to offer fertile ground for future research.

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