Is Mass Tourism Serious About Sustainability?

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Introduction

Is mass tourism making a serious paradigm shift towards sustainability, or is it merely a nudge? This issue may be examined from a range of perspectives (Weaver 2007), including: treatments in the academic literature; environmental management performance in the industry itself; tools such as ecolabels and awards which are intended to improve sustainability; the relative roles of consumers and corporations; the different perspectives of tourists from different nations; and the interplay between academic analysis and industry practice. These are considered in turn below.

Sustainability in the Tourism Research Literature

Sustainability is a major theme in the academic tourism literature, but these analyses are largely conceptual rather than practical (Saarinen 2006). Remarkably little has been published about the actual practices of commercial tourism corporations and operators in reducing their environmental impacts; and even less about the ecological significance of any such reductions, the reasons why they have been undertaken, the benefits gained by the companies concerned, the financial scale of the measures compared to company turnover, and similar practicalities. Academic tourism journals, and their referees, seem to look down on such submissions as too descriptive. This, however, applies not only to sustainability and environmental management, but arguably also to academic analyses of the tourism industry more generally. This is unfortunate, because it also means that commercial operators pay little attention to the academic literature. To a certain degree this may reflect differences in approach between the social sciences and the natural sciences, but not entirely. The natural sciences demand real-world observations as well as theory, but so do some of the social sciences.

Environmental Management Practices in the Tourism Industry

Environmental management practices which have actually been adopted within the mainstream tourism industry are generally only those which save money, e.g. by reducing energy water consumption; or which provide opportunities for public relations exercises; or both. This does indeed seem to be the case. There are a small number of companies which have indeed made significant investments in conservation and environmental management (see, e.g., Buckley 2003, 2006). In general, however, and especially in the mainstream tourism accommodation, transport and large-activity sectors, there is a great deal of publicity about rather small measures. Some companies boast about environmental measures which in fact merely represent compliance with applicable environmental law, or with conditions of development consent or operating permits. Some adopt (and publicise) rather small-scale energy or water conservation, or materials recycling programmes, as a way to cut costs without reducing guest satisfaction. Some claim green kudos from programmes which simply encourage guests to donate to environmental causes, without any financial

contribution from the company itself. Some invest a miniscule proportion of annual revenue, as low as hundredths of a percent, in heavily publicised measures which they use to apply for environmental awards, which then provide political capital when the company wants to negotiate permits for much larger-scale operations or expansions which do have significant environmental impacts.

Environmental Codes and Guidelines

There are numerous manuals, guidelines and codes of conduct for different components of the tourism industry and different types of tourism activity, ranging from manuals produced by the International Hotels Environment Initiative over a decade ago to the *Green Guide* series for outdoor tour operators (International Centre for Ecotourism Research 2007). Some protected area management agencies also provide their own codes of conduct. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (2007), for example, has quite a detailed and comprehensive set. Some of these Codes are indeed very vague or basic. Some, however, contain quite detailed and comprehensive sets of operational instructions (Garrod and Fennell 2004). Even for these, however, there do not seem to be any rigorous tests to determine whether tour operators actually do change their practices in response to such codes. Where current compliance with existing codes has been tested, however, it has generally proved to be quite poor, even where the codes are enshrined in legally enforceable regulations, and even when operators know they are under observation (Scarpaci and Dayanthi 2003; Waayers *et al*. 2006).

Environmental Award Schemes

Over recent decades a number of environmental award schemes have been established in the tourism sector (Font and Buckley 2001), and some of these are still operational. The better-known awards are highly coveted within the tourism industry, and are featured heavily in advertising materials. Presumably this indicates that these awards, or more probably their parent organisations, are recognised by tourists themselves and are hence valuable in marketing. The three best-known are probably the World Legacy Award from *National Geographic*, the Ecotraveler Award from *Condé Nast*, and the Tourism for Tomorrow Awards, established by British Airways but now run by the World Travel and Tourism Council. All of these depend very heavily on the goodwill and voluntary services of relevant experts as judges and assessors. Some include site assessments for shortlisted applicants, others do not.

Tourism Ecocertification Programs

Ecocertification schemes, in contrast, seem to be largely ignored by individual tourists, and most such schemes have extremely low penetration of their potential target markets. As noted by Weaver (2007), the much-hyped and supposedly comprehensive Green Globe scheme has in fact been adopted only by an infinitesimally small proportion of its target market, despite very considerable investment for over a decade. The World Hotel-link scheme, a recent competitor to Green Globe which originated from a World Bank project, has achieved very much greater membership in a short period of time using a franchise-style design. It uses a customer feedback system to provide social and environmental information, which may not be rigorous but is at least transparent. The Green Globe system will supposedly certify any operator which is marginally (5%) above mean environmental

performance for the industry subsector concerned on the basis of energy, water and waste criteria - but since these data have not been published, Green Globe certification means rather little from the perspective of an environmentally concerned consumer.

There are very few large-scale tourism ecocertification programmes that have achieved reasonably high penetration of their target markets. The Blue Flag programme for water quality at European bathing beaches is a government-funded destination-quality certification scheme which is of immediate significance for the health and enjoyment of every individual beachgoer, so it is not surprising that it is widely adopted and supported. The others certify environmental performance of tour operators, which appears to be of much less concern to most tourists, but which is of considerable interest to the management agencies of protected areas where tour companies may want to operate. Ecotourism Australia, in particular, states openly that its aim is to gain preferential access to protected areas for its ecocertified commercial members, and it is this which has made this scheme popular amongst Australian tour operators. The certification criteria for both Blue Flag and the Ecotourism Australia programme are publicly available.

Consumers and Corporations

The degree to which consumer consciousness is driven by corporate marketing, or corporate marketing reflects consumer concerns, is a complex issue which goes well beyond environmental management in the tourism industry. Certainly, however, evidence to date suggests firstly that environmental management measures by most tourism operations, and the labels which certify them, are rather small-scale and shallow; and secondly, that most tourists pay rather little attention to these ecocertification labels. Whether the ecolabels are weak because they know tourists don't care, or whether the tourists don't care because they know the ecolabels are weak, however, is difficult to deduce. There are indeed some commercially viable and quite large-scale tourism operations which have excellent environmental performance and also make significant contributions to conservation (Buckley 2003, 2006); but since they also provide a very high quality of product and service, it is not clear whether their clientele is attracted by environmental concerns. The most likely scenario seems to be that commercial tour operators use ecocertification programmes merely as a means to negotiate preferential access to protected areas; that retail tourists generally expect a basic level of good environmental management from all tourism operations, certified or not; and that only the top-ranked environmental awards, not certification programmes, are recognised by retail consumers and have any significance in marketing.

Newly Industrialised Nations

The suggestions above are derived principally from the observable behaviour of international tourists from the developed Western nations. International tourists from developed Eastern nations such as Japan and Korea do not necessarily behave in the same way as those from European and Anglophone nations. In addition, the numbers of both domestic and international tourists from the heavily populated and newly-industrialised nations such as China, India and Brazil is increasing very rapidly in response to changing economic and social conditions in those countries. And their attitude towards environmental management tourism remains unknown. Weaver (2007) suggests that possibly, exposure to ecocertified tourism products in countries such as Australia may change the attitude of tourists from countries such as China. The Chinese government, however, is not relying on such an

indirect effect. Instead, it is establishing its own national ecotourism standards, and has sent Chinese ecotourism experts to Australia to glean relevant information (Zhong *et al*. 2007).

Information Flow Between Industry and Academia

Finally, Weaver (2007) questions whether or not academic debate on any of these topics has any real influence on the tourism industry itself. A good question indeed, and one which is itself worthy of research attention. Equally significant, perhaps, is whether academic tourism researchers pay any attention to what is happening in the industry. Recent publications listing the most-cited tourism journals and the academics who have published in those journals most often reinforce the impression of a small clique of mutually cross-citing authors with a strong focus on social sciences, particularly on human motivations, perceptions and emotions. Articles which analyse the structure of tourism products, the geographic locations where they operate, the ways in which they dispose of human wastes, what they say in their marketing materials, or how much money they make, are few and far between. It seems that the editors and referees of most academic tourism journals consider such topics too descriptive. It is hence not surprising that engineers, economists, and geographers and natural scientists working on tourism prefer to publish in their own disciplinary journals (Tribe 2006); nor that even the highest-ranked tourism journals barely register in the overall scale of academic publishing (Moodie 2007).

Conclusions

Overall, therefore, Weaver (2007) is surely correct in the claim that the mainstream mass tourism industry has done very little to improve its sustainability, except for fuel-saving and other cost-cutting measures with incidental environmental benefits; and that so-called voluntary measures to improve environmental management, such as ecocertification, are no more effective in the tourism industry than any other (*cf* Gunningham and Grabosky 1998). I would add two further conclusions. Firstly, despite this overall trend there are indeed a small number of commercial tourism operations with excellent environmental performance, which do indeed deserve credit. And secondly, the most effective way to improve environmental performance in tourism, as in any other industry sector, is to improve environmental legislation which governs it.

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