
Chapter 18:

Paradox as a pervasive characteristic of sustainable tourism: Challenges, opportunities and trade-offs

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Introduction and review

The chapters in this compilation reflect the pervasiveness of paradox within sustainable tourism discourses. In most cases, paradoxes superficially present as contradictions, engendering a mindset among many of non-resolvability or problem ‘wickedness’ (Buchanan 1992) that dissuades even the best efforts at resolution. Denial, evasion, or maintenance of the status quo are often variably justified as acceptable and logical responses, as demonstrated by current discourses of opposition to calls for the reduction of carbon footprints (Gössling & Peters 2007). As Butler points out in chapter 6, several paradoxes are embedded in the very DNA of sustainable tourism, including a malleability that renders the idea as either ingeniously adaptable (Hunter 1997) or diabolically schizophrenic (Hall 1998). This can be contextualised as a paradox, rather than a contradiction, when using a conceptual framework such as enlightened mass tourism (Weaver 2014) (also discussed by Weaver in chapter 2) which facilitates the constructive amalgamation of apparently contradictory impulses.

Constructive amalgamations are achievable through a process of resolution-based dialectics that accommodates, for example, both the inertia of ‘sustainability’ and the dynamism of ‘development’. The paradox that tourism cannot be sustainable until it involves little or no travel, also mentioned by Butler, can thus be addressed by a compromise focus on
'environmentally smart' travel and the concurrent positioning of sustainability as a process of incremental improvement rather than an absolute goal. Whether such scale and pace of change is sufficient to redress the negative impacts of the associated carbon emissions is, however, unknowable. On the other hand, it is unlikely that society will accept the radical alternative of ending tourism altogether given the associated regional benefits as well as the promiscuous travel tendencies of contemporary society. The continued proclivity to travel for leisure purposes may therefore be an especially challenging paradox inviting especially innovative trade-offs, or the ultimate contradiction at a global scale.

Sustainable tourism, notwithstanding the global context of climate change and its possibly dire implications, is realistically and ultimately an issue for individual destinations. Hence the focus in many of the chapters in this book is on case studies involving small-scale peripheral locations. As in the tourism literature more broadly, destinations dominate these case studies in part because especially acute economic, environmental and sociocultural vulnerabilities in such places are assumed (Hall & Boyd 2005). In addition, the complexities of tourism and other implicated systems can be partially compensated for and more effectively engaged through a more confined and well-defined geographical context; through such containment trade-offs become more likely and feasible. Small islands illustrate both rationales and evoke in addition the appeal of the exotic for researchers and visitors alike while often demonstrating hyper-dependency on tourism (Apostolopoulos & Gayle, 2002).

As emphasised by Carlsen in chapter 7, this gives rise to another paradox associated with high dependency and low resilience, as evidenced by the Australian dependent territory of Cocos (Keeling) Island. The dependency arises not just from modest natural resource endowment, but also from a prioritisation of economic outputs over environmental and
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sociocultural integrity. In this case, both sociocultural and environmental integrity are in danger of being compromised as a result of even modest tourism-related development. Reiser and Pforr in chapter 11 describe similar dynamics in Niue though point out that isolation and poor infrastructure make it unlikely that tourism on the island will ever be economically sustainable. The ‘triple bottom line’ paradox of economic concentration that undermines the environmental and sociocultural contexts takes on exaggerated and idiosyncratic dimensions on Rottnest Island, as Mau describes in chapter 17, by merit of its proximity to the major city of Perth, and Rotnest’s lack of permanent residents. Tourism growth, in all these small island contexts, is regarded as inevitable and/or desirable by most stakeholders because of the positive economic outcomes, but also manageable in terms of safeguarding the attendant environmental and sociocultural integrity.

This attests to implicit support for the principle of enlightened mass tourism, although it seems that a public marketing image of ‘alternative tourism’ is still preferred in places such as Niue and Cocos (Keeling) - despite the desire for growth in visitation and associated infrastructure. Such paradoxical thinking is also present in Bhutan, which Teoh in chapter 9 describes as seeking to accelerate the growth of non-regional tourist arrivals to better attain its aspiration of very high GNH or ‘gross national happiness’. The GNH goal is closely associated with the ethical pretensions of alternative tourism even though high volume/low yield visitors from regional origin countries such as India have never been subject to the same restrictions. Although not covered in this book, similar dynamics are occurring in Dominica, the ecotourism-focused ‘nature island of the Caribbean’. In the case of Dominica, resource and infrastructural restrictions on resort-based tourism are being addressed by an emphasis on large-scale cruise ship visitation as a way of generating more tourism-based revenue (Weaver 2004). The challenge of simultaneously maintaining both the ‘nature island’ reputation and
mass tourism seems to be addressed largely through spatial trade-offs. The spatial trade-off involves cultivating a small number of site-hardened tourism ‘honeypots’ for cruise based mass tourism. Meanwhile the vast majority of the island is maintained as the local ‘backstage’ where tourism is largely confined to transit activity and backpacker-type segments.

Regarding peripheries within the more economically developed world, the British Columbian coastal community of Tofino on Vancouver Island also struggles to maintain an alternative tourism image and reputation in the face of rampant growth from tourism and amenity migration, as described by Sheppard, Dodds and Williams in chapter 13. As with small Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, there is an implicit hope that the economic gains from tourism acceleration can be reconciled with the environmental and social amenities that attracted visitors and migrants to Tofino in the first instance. Visitors in such communities often fan out into adjacent amenity-rich hinterlands for hiking, kayaking, wildlife photography and other activities. In this case, accommodation, transport and other services once again reveal very high levels of spatial concentration and site hardening within the ‘gateway’ settlement itself that embody trade-offs between mass and alternative tourism-type sensibilities. The more popular protected areas almost all display a similar pattern, following what Lawton (2001) describes as the ‘95/5 rule’ wherein 95% or more of visitors are happy to confine their activities to 5% or less of the park. Implicitly, this principle has been manifest in protected areas for many years through zoning regimes that include ‘visitor intensive’ or similar designations through to ‘wilderness’ or ‘semi-wilderness’ zones. The zoning of protected areas indicates that the accommodation of paradox and the practice of trade-offs have been longstanding features of protected area management.
Rural service centres in agricultural regions, unless focused around high-amenity activity such as wine production, usually do not face the same dilemma of ‘organically’ induced mass tourism growth. As a result such regions must be innovative in order to experience increased visitation. Planned events are considered one way of promoting tourism growth in a destination. As described by Mair in chapter 16, planned events such as the annual Elvis festival in the Australian town of Parkes are characterised by contrived themes and hyper-compressed space-time settings that entail both threat and opportunity to the tourism management process. This event is proving to be quite successful as an economic stimulant, though some question the effects that such a theme might have on the community’s reputation and sense of place, even though there is no apparent attempt to project an ‘alternative tourism’ identity.

Elsewhere, northern Italy’s Venosta Valley, according to Lun, Elmi and Pechlaner in chapter 12, faces not only the triple bottom line paradox but attendant challenges in reconciling dynamics and conflicts associated with seasonality (winter vs. summer), stakeholders (local residents vs. tourists) and sectors (agriculture and tourism) in the face of increasing climate change effects. Climate change is also implicated in the phenomenon of ‘last chance tourism’, as discussed in the context of the Canadian Arctic by Dawson and colleagues in chapter 10. Here, the paradox involves the desire of some tourists to visit destinations and attractions deemed to be vanishing, the act of visiting itself being alleged to accelerate this process through greenhouse gas emissions and local impacts of visitor activities.

Assumptions that the triple bottom line paradox can be resolved through mutually advantageous trade-offs are evident in calls for generic or specific strategic responses or ‘toolboxes’ that enable enlightened mass tourism outcomes. Carlsen for example advocates
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‘soft systems’ thinking for small islands that considers the inter-linkages among inter-dependent systems within the controlled-complexity context of spatial containment. A process-based systematic approach is also explicit in chapter 4 by Hughes and Morrison-Saunders, who emphasise the merits of EIA (environmental impact assessment) and interdisciplinary (that is, academic system-wide) research to effectively address the complexities of actual destinations and complement the principles of sustainable tourism. More explicitly stakeholder-based is Teoh’s emphasis on governmentality as a focus of analysis in Bhutan, and Sheppard, Dodds and Williams’ focus on good governance in Tofino. The Bhutan and Tofino examples promote sustainability-appropriate assessment and measurement frameworks to foster destination resilience and adaptability. Pforr in chapter 3 also calls for better governance based on principles of cooperation, broad participation, and better communication. Useful avenues of future research are found in the combination of government-related contexts and systems-related toolboxes for identifying and realising the trade-offs that embody the enlightened mass tourism approach. A potent paradox in all such stakeholder models, however, is the stark reality of governments, however construed, as bureaucratic, conservative and top-down entities highly vulnerable to the short-term political dictates of the day. How, under such conditions, can the ideals espoused by well-meaning academics actually be implemented? Does the combination of efficacious toolboxes but dysfunctional contexts for their utilisation represent another especially challenging paradox or unresolvable contradiction?

The task of planning and managing for sustainable tourism can be complicated by the myriad of stakeholders and vested interests, and the commonly associated patchwork of land and water ownership patterns. This is not as problematic on Rottnest Island and similar situations where protected area status and the absence of permanent residents renders the place a virtual
laboratory for the complementary implementation of conventional management tools such as certification, environmental management systems, and recreational opportunity spectrum. As discussed by Dowling in chapter 14, UNESCO-affiliated ‘geoparks’ are also assumed to be sustainable because of the regulations and management regimes. Like ecotourism, the parent construct of ‘geotourism’ can generate a sense of complacency in some quarters. Yet, environmental and sociocultural sustainability is not guaranteed even under such prestigious regimes as UNESCO, which itself encourages further tourism development around Geoparks and World Heritage Areas, albeit abetted by interpretation that emphasises appropriate visitor behaviour and attitudes.

This issue is of particular concern in China where domestic tourism has increased from negligible levels in the 1970s to over three billion trips in 2013 (CNTA 2014). Much of this domestic travel is being channelled to rural protected areas as the country’s transportation network continues to improve. Distinctive Chinese cultural traditions and political realities might require a specialised model of enlightened mass tourism ‘with Chinese characteristics’. For example, the idea of ‘wilderness’, as construed in Western contexts, may not be relevant while ‘visitor intensive’ areas may involve a level of development alien to Western protected areas. An issue here and in other BRICS countries, as emphasised by Nepal in chapter 5, is the desire for equitable access to such sites. The notion of equitable access can be considered a matter of social sustainability but may also have dire implications for the environmental wellbeing of heavily visited parks. Hence, although Nepal cites the Annapurna Conservation Area (in Nepal) as a good example of the synthesis of conservation and development due to the implementation of ‘localised’ interpretations of sustainable tourism, its location between China and India indicates the possibility of much higher international visitation levels in the future and associated increased impacts.
The view that such expected visitation increase can be managed in a sustainable way as our management ‘toolbox’ becomes more sophisticated is challenged by the vagaries of human nature and the aforementioned diabolical nature of political systems. The inconsistencies inherent in human behaviour give rise to the paradox of persistent gaps between rhetoric and reality. Pforr’s call for better governance emerges from his contention that escalating rhetoric in support of sustainability seems to be accompanied by the increasing ineffectiveness of the very strategies that are intended to embody and implement that rhetoric. The ecotourism plan for Western Australia is cited as evidence. Similarly, Deng-Westphal, Beeton and Anderson in chapter 15 lament the paradox of ecolabel certification program proliferation and the concomitantly negligible uptake of these programs by industry, regardless of political context. Resolution of cost, consumer awareness and credibility issues may well help to resolve this paradox as the authors contend, but one suspects that the Jekyll and Hyde character of human nature also plays a role. This character is illustrated by the oft-demonstrated gap between apparently sincere public concern over major environmental issues such as climate change and a lack of willingness to engage in more than superficial behaviour to resolve such issues (Kollmuss & Agyeman 2002). Thus, dysfunctional political systems may ultimately owe their existence to the fickleness and paradoxical inclinations of the general public rather than to any innate wickedness. If people demanded a higher standard of commitment to achieving sustainability outcomes and based their consumer and voting decisions accordingly, it is likely that the mainstream political parties would adjust their agendas accordingly in the interests of political survival.

**Embracing the differences**

Before succumbing to pessimism and urges to label these paradoxes as unresolvable
contradictions, we might entertain resolution-based dialectics. The resolution based dialectics approach raises the possibility of *embracing* the Jekyll and Hyde of human nature in our thinking about sustainable tourism planning and management and the toolbox this thinking generates. This in itself is an interesting paradox. That people will often act in their own self-interest is self-evident, but so is altruistic behaviour. Thus, many people feel compelled to see polar bears in Churchill through motivations of voyeurism and ego satisfaction (‘I was one of the last to see…’), but the experience can also be used to harness the latent potential for behavioural transformation and for realising the ‘ambassador effect’ of visitors who actively work post-visit for a better environment. Interplays of self-interest and altruism also pervade volunteer tourism (Guttentag 2009) and are at the core of social exchange dynamics wherein individuals make decisions on the basis of perceived costs and benefits to oneself and to family and social groups more broadly (Fredline & Faulkner 2000). It may prove useful to segment the market on the basis of the self-interest/altruism balance sheet.

Ernawati, Dowling and Sanders, in chapter 8, frame the existence of two distinct types of visitor to community-based tourist initiatives in Bali as a paradox. Specifically, overnight visitors seem to resemble more the ideal alternative tourist given their desire to interact with and learn about the local people and their culture. The more numerous daytime excursionists, by contrast, are more like mass tourists, happy to spend their nights and most of their day in a nearby resort, venturing out to the village more for diversion and curiosity than a deep and abiding concern about the locals. Yet, the paucity of excursionists in the village at night can be interpreted not just as a missed opportunity to generate revenue from the purchase of accommodation and food, but also a *realised* opportunity of reduced sociocultural and environmental impacts that might otherwise be increased by the prolonged intrusion of these
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visitors into the local ‘backstage’. Both segments can be included harmoniously in the local sustainable tourism strategy regardless of the political context. Indeed, strategies that consciously combine the impulses of realism and idealism may prove more effective at converting the many paradoxes inherent to this activity into opportunities for truly sustainable outcomes.

An overarching lesson emerging from all the case studies in this text is that mass tourism is an inevitable and dominating phenomenon that will not go away. This is highlighted by Weaver in chapter 2, Nepal et al in Chapter 5 and reinforced by Butler’s assertion (chapter 6) that the only guaranteed form of sustainable tourism is no tourism, and that this is patently unlikely and also undesirable for many destinations. The synthesis of enlightened mass tourism discussed by Weaver in Chapter 2 and complimented by Nepal et al in Chapter 5 essentially requires adoption of sustainability principles and associated behaviour into the practice of mass tourism. That is, the strengths of the mass market are combined with the practical elements of ‘alternative tourism’.

The melding of sustainability principles into mass tourism practices may come about through several drivers. Firstly, the general public awareness of a need for sustainable development can translate into consumer demand for ethical and responsible, but affordable and comfortable, tourism experiences. Consumer pressure can function to shift common practices toward sustainability. It may also be driven from the supply side by a growing corporate awareness of social and environmental responsibility as a part of good business at the global scale. There is ample evidence of a corporate will to go beyond the minimum for compliance in order to build brand and a social license to operate. Finally, by explicitly promoting the notion of enlightened mass tourism and embedding this as a fundamental principle of tourism
management, there is potential to lead the debate away from ‘either-or’ conflict based
dialectics toward a ‘both-and’ complimentary approach and move the sustainable tourism
debate beyond its current stagnation.

**Trade-offs as part of dialectics**

While the current dominant economic development paradigm of sustained growth suggests
that everyone can have everything at all times and places, it seems obvious that this cannot be
the reality. We live in a complex, integrated socio-ecological system with limited resources
where impacts on one component will positively or negatively affect other components of the
system (Summers et al., 2014). That is, human activity uses resources, generates waste and
relies on services provided by ecological processes in what is effectively a system with
capacity limits in terms of provision of resources and absorption of impacts (van den Bergh &
Verbruggen 1999; Wackernagel & Rees, 1997). Activities that consume or have negative
impacts on particular resources therefore limit availability of those resources for other
purposes. As a consequence, strategic decisions must be made regarding what types of
resource allocations and impacts are desirable and what are not - in other words, trade-offs
are inevitable in sustainable development, as the case studies in this text demonstrate. This
concept – simple in theory but less so in execution – merits further consideration given its
centrality to resolution-based dialectics.

Morrison-Saunders and Pope (2013) note that consideration of trade-offs is a defining
characteristic of negotiating complex decisions, such as those associated with implementing
sustainable tourism development. This is not the same as the ‘either-or’ approach that
embodies mass and alternative tourism as exclusive opposites referred to earlier in this book
and emblematic of conflict-based dialectics. The acceptance of trade-offs among diverse
stakeholders requires judgements of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in terms of impacts and consequences. This in turn rests on identification of economic, social and/or environmental values that are determined to be negotiable versus those that are seen as non-negotiable (Morrison-Saunders & Pope, 2013). Such judgements are strongly influenced by political and social pressures and the governance structures in place. Where trade-offs involve adoption of acceptable impacts and maintenance of non-negotiable values, there is a ‘both-and’ decision, or a win-win result.

Previously, authors such as Cater (1995) and Hunter (1997), have commented on the need for trade-offs as part of a practical application of sustainable tourism principles. With a focus on environmental impacts, Cater (1995) discussed the necessity for compromise solutions based on trade-offs between interest groups associated with a given activity or destination. This in turn requires the various tourism interest groups to determine what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, what is negotiable and non-negotiable. Cater uses the tension between growth in tourism at a destination, economic contribution to standards of living and impacts on environmental quality as an example of where trade-offs must be made. Hunter (1997) noted that this approach is usually dominated by the priorities of the day and perceptions of acceptability and negotiability. Priorities are generally determined by the dominant interest groups at any given time and place (Hardy & Beeton, 2001). Thus, perceptions of what comprises an acceptable trade-off could change over time.

For example, Teoh in Chapter 9 essentially describes a trade-off in Bhutan based on limiting the number and type of tariff paying tourist admitted to the country. The limit to numbers is implemented through processes associated with administrative, financial and physical
barriers. The substantive trade-off appears is between extent of economic benefit versus a perception of minimising social and environmental impacts while part of the tariff contributes to Bhutan’s social infrastructure. The social-and cultural integrity and environmental quality of Bhutan could be seen as non-negotiable values in this context. The economic benefits and costs could be seen as negotiable. In the context of Bhutan’s GNH approach to development, this was considered an acceptable trade-off by decision makers at the time. More recently, Bhutan’s tourism policy has shifted toward a focus on economic gain, creating some apparent discord amongst the region’s tourism interest groups who have concerns that this could result in increased negative environmental and social impacts. It is to be expected that any trade-off will result in some level of discontent among at least some stakeholders, and that management strategies should do what they can within reason to mollify the discontented depending on what stake is involved and how much damage is incurred. Local residents who are displaced by development deemed to be in the broader national interest, for example, are usually seen to merit more compensation and attention than those, such as non-local environmental or social activists, more peripherally inconvenienced.

Mau and Tedesco (Chapter 17) also provide some insight into the complexities of managing for sustainable tourism and the trade-offs required between environmental, social and economic imperatives (and geopolitical ones if a quadruple bottom line approach is adopted, as in China). In essence, the managers and other interest groups associated with Rottnest Island have accepted a trade-off based on limits to the extent and character of tourism infrastructure and accommodation development. Restriction on development limits the number and type of overnight visitors on the island at any one time. The trade-off is focussed on retaining certain ecological, social and cultural values and is associated with ‘low key’ tourism development. The limits on development effectively restrict tourism revenue for a
destination with relatively high management costs. From a dialectics perspective, the trade-off regarding limits to development as a means for conserving core values, while limiting revenue, is seen by Mau and Tedesco as an opportunity to invest in innovative management that promotes sustainable practice and reduces management costs. In this instance, trade-offs that impose limits on development act as a driver for innovative practice. This differs from the Bhutan example where the initial trade-off was seen to limit economic benefits, precipitating a shift in policy that effectively altered determination of what is negotiable and acceptable regarding Bhutanese social, environmental and economic dynamics.

Trade-offs, then, situate as the core operational construct that brings resolution-based dialectics, and enlightened mass tourism, to fruition. Issues of governance and management need to be taken into account as critical variables that dictate the type and rate of trade-offs that are possible within a given destination context to resolve the wicked problem of sustainable development. In a deliberately optimistic vein, this textbook has elected to frame various conflicts within the tourism field as paradoxes rather than contradictions. Framing tourism in this way promotes the notion of compromise rather than unbending conflict. Accumulating evidence of successful resolution through acceptable trade-off in the tourism field can work to promote this approach. Furthermore, ideas such as enlightened mass tourism provide a conceptual basis for resolution and a framework for constructive engagement among stakeholders. As editors, we therefore remain confident that such efforts are worthwhile and, indeed, constitute a particularly promising path of rejuvenation for sustainable tourism discourses. We hope that this book contributes to that reinvigoration.

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