

Tourism Destination Quality

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Tourism Destination Quality: Attributes and Dimensions

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Preface

For at least 50 years tourism, as a major socioeconomic phenomenon, has been steadily growing. During this period, there have been several temporary blips, in which growth has slowed, or numbers have actually fallen, but only for short periods. Some of the factors leading to a decline, or more typically a slowing in growth, have been as a result of natural causes, for example, volcanic explosions and tsunamis. However, others have occurred following human-induced changes, many of which have economic causes such as a sudden rise in oil prices, stock market crashes or the global recession of 2008/9.

Despite these downturns in tourism, there has been significant growth since 1970. Hence, for the first time, there were more than one billion international travellers in 2012, according to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2014). By 2017, this figure had reached almost 1.4 billion international travellers, which amounted to over 15% of the world's population (WTO, 2018). Although some of this activity may result from the same travellers being involved in more than one journey per year, meaning the precise scale of tourism is difficult to gauge (Leiper, 1999), tens of millions of people globally work directly in the industry and many more are employed indirectly. Hundreds of millions of people are on the receiving end of tourism activity in tourism destinations, and it is in these locations that tourists and local communities meet and interact.

During this period of growth from the 1970s, the tourism industry has tended to view the world as one with unlimited natural and cultural resources, and these can be exploited for tourism activities. In the last 25 years or so, this view has changed to some degree, with the emergence of more environmentally friendly activities, although mass tourism is still a common feature of the industry.

Until the end of 2019, researchers, analysts, media commentators and many politicians and planners argued that a key contributor to changes in tourism activity, for the next 50 years, would be global warming. Although the great majority of scientists agree that global warming is occurring and there is still some disagreement about the cause, almost no one denies that it is happening. It will significantly affect tourism as sea levels rise, daily and monthly weather conditions change and climate zones shift. Coastal locations and mountain areas will be particularly badly hit. Some destinations most at risk had begun to prepare in the last two decades for the effects of global warming and were becoming involved in more environmentally or culturally sensitive, community-focused forms of tourism. However, those preparing to respond to global warming and those yet to do so believed it to be a gradual process and they had time to react. Just before the

end of 2019, a major change occurred that shook the world of tourism, as well as the global economic, social and political systems.

Since the end of the First World War, there have been outbreaks of diseases that have killed hundreds of thousands, and in some cases, millions of people. The ‘Spanish flu’ outbreak of 1918 was the worst case of an epidemic disease in recent history and, as many as 100 million people died, it is believed (Arnold, 2018). Its cause is still not fully understood, but it devastated countries already suffering as a result of the War. Tourism was not directly linked to the epidemic of 1918, although the movement of people involved in the War was believed to be a contributory factor (Arnold, 2018). In 2003, another epidemic disease, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), emerged from Southwest China and it spread along major tourism routes, initially by commercial passenger aircraft flying from Hong Kong not only to other parts of Southeast Asia but also to major tourism destinations around the world. Therefore, tourism was at the centre of the SARS epidemic, as not only did tourists help spread the disease but also the tourism industry was badly affected when many tourists died from the disease, others tried to leave affected destinations and yet more cancelled or postponed planned visits to destinations. Nevertheless, SARS was relatively short lived, although there were over 7,000 cases worldwide, occurring in 32 countries, with over 800 deaths (Mason, Grabowski and Du, 2005).

Several locations, particularly those in Southeast Asia, including Hong Kong, Singapore and Vietnam, responded by establishing task forces to deal with any further SARS outbreak, or a similar type of virus-related disease. This preparation has put these locations in a strong position when confronting the cause of the shock to the global economic, social and political system of late 2019 – the COVID-19 pandemic. Like SARS, COVID-19 is a corona virus but as of late April 2020, when this prologue was written, has been far more deadly, as there have been almost three million recorded cases and over 200,000 deaths.

In terms of COVID-19 and this book, what is particularly relevant is the almost complete absence of a tourism industry anywhere in the world at the time of writing, and even more disturbing, little indication of how it will be possible to get out of the current situation and return to normality. COVID-19, like SARS, began in China but spread quickly to almost everywhere on earth. Once again tourism was involved in spreading the disease, and once again tourism as an industry has been hit badly. By late April 2020, the world’s airlines were almost all partially or completely grounded. Bars, restaurants, cafés, hotels and entertainment and sporting venues remain closed or are subject to extreme restrictions. Freedom of movement within and between countries has been severely curtailed in many continents – just about everywhere has been, either in lockdown, or slowly emerging from it, but with little idea of what the future will look like.

What has this to do with this book? When tourism returns, as it surely will, based on the experience of the past 50 years, what type of destinations will tourists want to visit? Just about anywhere, may be the response from those released after weeks in complete isolation, Perhaps, initially, but probably not for long! It seems very likely that tourist will seek places where they can find what they missed when confined in lockdown, such as quality accommodation, quality food and drink,

quality entertainment, quality activities and a quality environment – in short, quality places that provide what tourists require and that generate good experiences! This book has been written to indicate how to assess and measure where to find these ‘good experiences’, and what conditions for tourists exist there, or as indicated in its title, in quality tourism destinations. The COVID-19 outbreak has made the rationale for the book that much stronger, for after COVID-19, quality will matter more than quantity and entrepreneurs, businesses, planners and managers will need to create a significant competitive edge for their destination, to lure back inevitably reluctant, possibly worried and probably poorer visitors, whose attitudes to tourism experiences will almost certainly have changed, following the pandemic. A destination with quality attributes and dimensions may just have that competitive edge!

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