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Sustainable experience in research and practice

In this overview, the aim is to provide an understanding of sustainable experience and its related concepts and practices. We do this both by drawing on research and practical examples. It is important to note that this overview provides only a snapshot and not a full picture of what a sustainable experience is. We look forward to further exploring this topic with you!

Theoretical perspectives on sustainable experience

Key components of the concept

Sustainable experience is a fuzzy concept that can mean different things to different people. To understand the concept of sustainable experience, it is vital to first have an understanding of the concepts 'experience' and 'sustainable tourism' separately. From a tourism destination development perspective, sustainable experience can be seen as a means to achieve competitive advantage and enhance the sustainability of a destination. In addition, it is a useful concept that can provide insight on how producers and visitors can mutually enhance the sustainability of the destination and the experience of the tourists (Breiby et al., 2020). Tussyadiah (2014), for instance, demonstrates how active engagement of key stakeholders (including the end-users) in designing the experience-scape, can be a means to offer a more sustainable experience.

Understanding experience

Experience as a concept has been interpreted differently by different scholars. As a consequence, this has led to a plethora of definitions and conceptualizations. For instance, using a psychological and sociological perspective, Maslow (1964) defined experience as the most exciting encounter an individual can have, and which is usually short in duration and accompanied by positive affect. Caru and Cova (2003) defined it as ways in which culture affects how an individual receives events into his or her consciousness. Whilst, employing an economic and marketing perspective, Schmitt (1999), sees it as personal events, that occur as a response to some stimulations, such as advertisements. A review of the literature also reveals that there are various types of experience that an individual can encounter; memorable experience (linked with individual evaluations of subjective experiences), flow (defined as an intrinsically rewarding experience), peak experience (highly valued moment that are personally very meaningful), and extraordinary experience (emotionally intense experience that are perceived as magical). However, regardless of the ways

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it has been defined or conceptualized, there are some commonalities of experiences, in that they all relate to events, or encounters that demand involvement of people experiencing them, are subjective in nature and recallable.

Unpacking the concept of sustainable tourism

Likewise, there is much disagreement when it comes to the concept of sustainable tourism (see Budeanu et al., 2016 for more details). Sustainable tourism has the aim to create economic value, while preserving the natural and social resources of the territory (Dans & González, 2019). According to the UNWTO (2020), sustainable tourism is the current and future economic, social and environmental impacts that simultaneously benefit the local residents, tourists, industry and the environment. At the core, there is also consensus that sustainable tourism should offer meaningful experience to tourists by ensuring sustainable tourism practices and participation of all key stakeholders, including political leadership. Meaningful experience in the words of Kottler (1997) as well as Smit and Melissen (2018), refers to experiences that can be transformative and stimulate new and deeper understandings. In particular, it should lead to sustained change in individuals and enact a positive change in attitude and behaviour.

Experience and sustainable tourism

Due to the vagueness present in the underlying concept 'experience' and 'sustainable tourism', understanding the concept of 'sustainable experience' has posed a similar type of difficulty. Even though few attempts have been made there is no agreement on what exactly sustainable experience is all about. An initial attempt to define the term sustainable experience was recently made by Breidy et al. (2020, p. 14), who portrays it as "an experience that raises deep, meaningful emotions and memories that can encourage tourists' contribution toward destination sustainability". A review of the literature reveals that the notion of sustainable experience has mainly been studied within specific contexts that are linked to volunteer tourism (e.g. Wearing, 2001), social tourism (e.g. Minnaert et al., 2006) and responsible tourism (e.g. Caruana et al., 2014). These studies highlight the ecological, economic, social and cultural significance of sustainable experiences. Among scholars there is also consensus that sustainable experience relates to: (1) a positive interaction with the natural and cultural environment (e.g. Breidy et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2017; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013), (2) positive transformation that occurs through learning something novel that can ultimately lead to a change in behaviour and attitude (e.g. Breidy et al., 2020), (3) involvement of different stakeholder groups in co-creating the experience (e.g. Tussyadiah, 2014), as well as (4) the experience of positive emotions such as joy, awe (e.g. Prebensen et al., 2012). Recently, there has also been upsurge of how digitalisation of destinations can also offer a more sustainable experience (e.g. Fissi et al., 2019).

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Practitioner perspectives on sustainable experience

Definition of sustainable experience and sustainable tourism industry

Visit Sweden has developed a definition of a sustainable experience: "A sustainable Swedish tourism experience takes responsibility for an attractive and sustainable offering, based on the needs of the visitor, the companies, the environment and the local community. Without jeopardizing the opportunities of future generations to do the same". This definition builds on a definition of a sustainable tourism industry, developed by Visit Sweden and the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth: "A sustainable tourism industry takes responsibility for present as well as future economic, social and environmental impact, starting from the needs of visitors, companies, the environment and the local community".

Sustainability tools leading the way to sustainable experiences?

The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth has, by the help of Ramboll Management Consulting, identified how different methods and models for work on quality and sustainability can be used in destinations and tourism companies (Tillväxtverket, 2019). They found that many tools (in total, 40 were identified) are available to Swedish destinations and tourism companies, including certifications, labels, monitoring systems and standards. Most tools are aimed at tourism companies while some target destinations. The environmental dimension is dominating, while social and economic sustainability dimensions have become more common over time. Many tools moreover assume a holistic perspective on sustainability. At the destination level, many certifications are based on the standard established by the Global Sustainable Tourism Councils, a framework that links into the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 (Tillväxtverket, 2019).

The report holds that sustainability tools can generate different kinds of values for a destination, such as benchmarking, comparison with others, and sharing of experiences; increased transparency; improved structure related to sustainability work; as well as possibilities to measure climate impact by the help of indicators. In order to prevent that the work with sustainability tools become overwhelming, it is also emphasized that it is important to adjust the level of ambition to the size and capacity of the tourism company (Tillväxtverket, 2019), which is an important issue to raise, especially as some tourism companies and destinations do not have the resources to engage in sustainability tools, and find it hard to see their upsides.

Sustainability dimensions and criteria

It is challenging, and far from always desirable, to separate sustainability into different dimensions, since they are all more or less interconnected. Furthermore, there is a risk of missing out on central elements related to sustainable experiences if focusing only on separate dimensions and related criteria; examples being planning, governance and management issues; communication, knowledge sharing and learning; innovation, co-creation and participation; digitalisation, ICT based solutions, digital tool and AI. However, there can also be values and benefits in outlining sustainability dimensions and related criteria, such as the possibility to

unpack a big, fuzzy concept, into something more concrete and actionable. In an effort to identify criteria for 'sustainable tourism', Gebhard, Meyer and Roth (2009) pinpointed four main clusters, namely: 1) community well-being, 2) protection of natural and cultural environment, 3) tourism product quality and tourist satisfaction, and 4) management and monitoring. Furthermore, Riksantikvarieämbetet (2017) illustrates different components related to sustainable development of society, indicating that they regard sustainability dimensions as both separated and overlapping or interconnected (Figure 1, below).
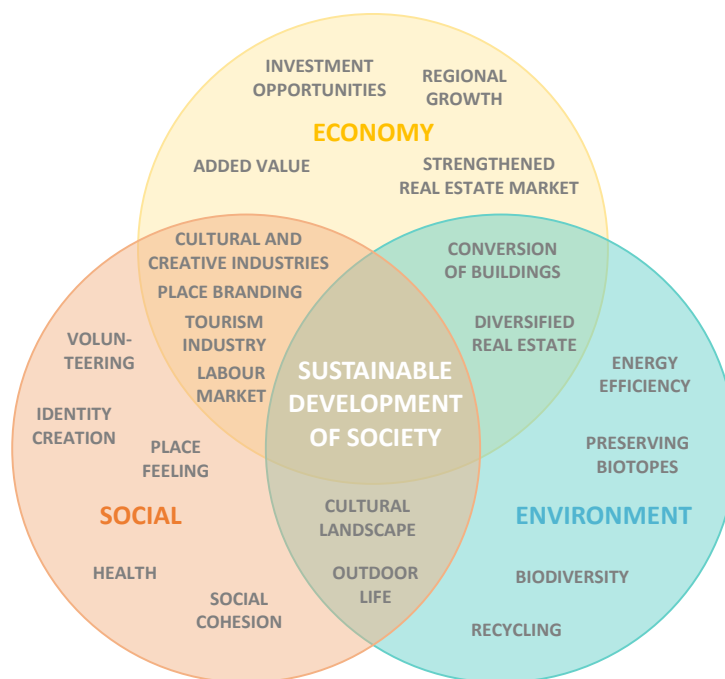

Figure 1: Illustration of components related to sustainable development of society (Riksantikvarieämbetet, 2017, p. 28; translation from Swedish to English by authors)

Environmentally sustainable experience

In the view of Visit Sweden, to offer a sustainable Swedish tourism experience from an environmental perspective, the experience should not harm the environment, climate or the resources of nature. Criteria that can be related to an environmentally sustainable experience, discussed by Gebhard et al. (2009) include, for example, nature protection, sustainable use of natural resources, protection of natural heritage, and enactment of environmental awareness. Other areas that can be addressed include land and water use, transportation, biodiversity, energy efficiency, recycling, and more.

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Socially sustainable experience

Visit Sweden describes a socially sustainable experience as inclusive, equal and tolerant. Here, visitors, locals and all people feel safe. A socially sustainable experience moreover offers and helps to create places and meetings where all people enjoy, take responsibility and respect each other. Criteria related to a socially sustainable experience can be tied to employment and improvement of living conditions and quality of life (Gebhard et al., 2009), actions dealing with segregation, a focus on human rights, and self-fulfilment. Other central elements could be the local population's satisfaction with tourism development and e.g. overcrowding; which relates to participation and local control, i.e. participation of the locals in the decision-making processes regarding spatial planning of tourism facilities and infrastructure as well as concerning type and level of tourism and tourism related development (Gebhard et al., 2009). Additional criteria could include accessibility (Smart Tourism Capital, 2020), including accessibility to environments and buildings (Riksantikvarieämbetet, 2017).

Culturally sustainable experience

According to Visit Sweden, a culturally sustainable experience respects and works to preserve, use and develop local traditions, language and culture. Criteria that can be related to a culturally sustainable experience can incorporate enhancement of local traditions, conservation and liveliness of culture and traditions, sustainable use of cultural resources, protection of cultural heritage, including conservation and promotion of the cultural heritage, as well as cultural exchange leading to increased awareness and mutual understanding (Gebhard et al., 2009). A culturally sustainable experience can also be seen in relation to cultural heritage – how it creates a sense of belonging and an understanding of our place in time, and how it can act as a resource to integrate refugees into the Swedish society through involvement in the development of historic environments (Riksantikvarieämbetet, 2017). Furthermore, sustainable experiences can be created in relation to cultural and creative industries (Smart Tourism Capital, 2020).

Economically sustainable experience

When it comes to an economically sustainable experience, Visit Sweden put forth that it is important that the experiences offered to the visitors are profitable and create conditions for the company behind the experience to deliver a surplus, create security for staff and have the conditions to be able to develop in line with current market conditions. Criteria that can be emphasized in relation to an economically sustainable experience are, for example, strengthening the local economy and the long-term economic viability, generation of income as well as employment (Gebhard et al., 2009). Furthermore, criteria can also include quality of tourism products offered; quality of transportation, accommodation, food and hospitality; as well as quality of guides and information (ibid.). An economically sustainable experience can also be tied to cultural and creative industries (Smart Tourism Capital, 2020).

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Visit Finland's 7-step approach to sustainable tourism

Visit Finland has developed what they call the 'Sustainable Travel Finland programme', which is designed for destinations and tourism companies in Finland, with the purpose to help the tourism industry in Finland to adopt sustainable practices (Business Finland, 2020). The idea is to provide destinations and tourism companies with a concrete toolkit for sustainable tourism. Companies and destinations that undergo the entire programme are recognised with the Sustainable Travel Finland label. The programme is divided into seven steps and an online platform has been created for the programme. The seven steps are: 1) commitment, 2) increasing know-how, 3) development plan, 4) responsible communication, 5) certification and auditing, 6) verification and measurability, 7) agreement and continuous development.

Visit Britain's toolbox for sustainability

Visit Britain try to maximize sustainability through 'Best practice guides' containing good examples for how hotels, bed and breakfasts, amusement parks, holiday resorts, etc. can be made more sustainable (Visit Britain, 2020a). Visit Britain has also produced a 'Keep it real toolkit', which is a booklet aimed at tourism companies working with sustainability and struggling with how to connect their sustainability work with economic advantages and profit (Visit Britain, 2020b).

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