

BOOK REVIEW

Tourism and Sustainable Development: Reconsidering a Concept of Vague Policies

Jörn W. Mundt, editor (2011). Erich Schmidr Verlag

This is yet another book to add to the current corpus of knowledge on tourism and sustainable development. Hence, the question I asked myself when reviewing this book is how different can this book be in trying to move us away from today's political rhetoric in the use of the term "sustainability". The book is mainly targeted at seasoned researchers and also policy makers that has always struggled in operationalizing the model of sustainability due to the vagueness of the concept. Hence, the premise behind the book is simply that the concept of sustainable tourism has been used superficially by all stakeholders including researchers and practitioners. The author, J.W. Mundt, has been critical and contemptuous in his view of the concept of sustainability.

The tourism industry's interest in appearing to be "green" or "sustainable" has increased in exponential proportions over the past few years. After the failed climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009, the hopeful Cancun conference in 2010 and the more successful Durban summit recently in 2011, Mankind has to face the following reality that the concept of sustainability has no significance if the following crisis cannot be resolved by the very reason why such concept was introduced in the first place:

1. Feeding a global population predicted to be half as big again as at the turn of this century.
2. Eliminating poverty and inequality whilst providing an acceptable quality of life for all.
3. Harnessing sufficient energy to power our economies without damaging environmental consequences.
4. Halting the decline in biodiversity and learning to leave in harmony with other species.



J.W. Mundt attempts to contribute to a deeper understanding of the concept of sustainability by providing a closer look at the original definition and reviewing its conceptual history which helps to untangle the terminological confusion that are used by many to their advantage or sometimes disadvantage. Nonetheless, this book gives us a fresh perspective in the sense it is little eclectic and certainly not the usual standard text in the area of tourism and sustainability. Thus, it is indeed a good read for all.

A multidisciplinary and inter-disciplinary approach is adopted by the author in discussing the complex interactions that surround sustainability. Only three out of the eight chapters elaborated in detail the links, in relation to tourism. Due to this, readers are exposed to the wider areas around the topic. Eight chapters are laid out with two “Excursus” in Chapter 3 and 5 [Note: *Ex-cur-sus* (*k-skûr s s*). n. pl. *ex-cur-sus-es* is a lengthy, appended exposition of a topic or point].

Chapter 1 acts to give an overview of the current state as an introduction or preface (which is visibly mission in this book). The evolution and interpretation across history is explored. Nonetheless, the chapter lacks discussion on the evolution of sustainability in the context of tourism. Interestingly, the chapter ends with a discussion on the academic market for sustainable tourism. In the ‘publish or perish’ paradigm that rules much of the academic world, the attractiveness of ‘sustainability’ related research topics appears to be fashionable rather than a manifestation of the perceived overall importance of the issue especially the on-going global debate on climate change.

Chapter 2 elaborates in detail the concept of sustainably successfully. This include discussions on the original concept of sustainability defined in the Brundtland Report (1987) in comparison with the modern understanding of the term, ‘weak and strong sustainability rules’ and the most interesting part of the chapter on ‘development is not growth’. This discussion is continued into chapter 3 (Excursus 1) where a digression of the discussion is outlined on topics such as ‘markets of violence’, ‘the dubious character of aid’, ‘pillarisation of society’, and the end of the section with topics such as the popularised ‘pro-poor tourism’ which is seen as another ‘green-washing’ or marketing tool for development agencies and non-governmental organisation in order to gain more money using the issue of ‘alleviating poverty via tourism’.

Moving on to the very academic chapter 4, sound discussion on the ‘three pillars’ approach of sustainability is well outlined in figures to show the relationship between environment, society and economy. Nonetheless, the chapter appears to further focus on ‘social sustainability’

with lacking in discussion on the other two dimensions of sustainability (environment and economy). The understanding of the social sustainability concept is further debated here as it appears the term may or may not denote, “the social preconditions for sustainable development or the need to sustain specific social structures and customs”. Against this background, the chapter make a plea for a more accurate utilisation of terms by going back to the basics to avoid the whole concept of sustainability in danger to be discredited and maybe even abandoned.

The second digression (Excuses II) of chapter 5 focusses the discussion to another popular terminology that has evolved from sustainability, ‘corporate social responsibility (CSR)’ and ‘non-government organisation (NGO)’. The author has been critical on this two under researched areas. For NGOs, CSR is the means by which to demand higher standards of corporate behaviour with the fundamental of sustainability at the backdrop. At a glance, the plethora of NGOs actively promoting sustainability issues and demanding CSR give an impression of plurality of concepts and opinion. However, a closer look reveals pretty much the same rhetoric.

Chapter 6 highlights the current global debate in the very complex issue of ‘climate change’. This is followed by Chapter 7 and 8 which provide us with some empirical and descriptive dialogue on the tourism industry and sustainability, which should have been the core of the book rather than “leaving the best (the essential) for the last”. In these two chapters, the author has well contextualised the issues of sustainability that was well elaborated in the previous six chapters, to the tourism industry. As quoted, indeed “tourism is probably the most visible symbol of both globalisation and pollution”. Chapter 7 also interesting discussed thought provoking topics such as, ‘culture is culture because of change’ and ‘the same is different’, where tourism is often seen as a “dynamic force homogenizing societies and commodifying cultures across the globe”, with cultures generally open to continuous change.

Finally, an interesting way to conclude the book (Chapter 9) with rationalisation of the book structure and the sub-section on “Taylorisation of Academia’ where the focus of the discussion was on the German-speaking countries, seem out of place in the discussion of the book.

In summing up, the book is interesting but not what you expect to get looking at just the title, “Reconsidering a Concept of Vague Policies”. The book only focusses on the tourism scene in two chapters towards the end and lack projection of what to expect in the years to come. Nonetheless, the book is worth reading as it is written in not a typical book that you expect on ‘sustainability’. Indeed it is an interdisciplinary

and overarching critique of the modern concept of sustainability and its application in the globalised tourism industry.

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