

## REFLECTIONS ON TOURISM, DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

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*This paper presents some reflections on the need to contribute to the construction of alternative paradigms for the relationship between tourism, local development and sustainability. These paradigms need to be constructed from an environmental perspective that integrates natural and cultural (social, political and economic) factors rather than analyzing them separately. The paper also exposes the need to include different sectors of society, communities and regions that have so far remained relegated, via community participation, preservation of the environmental, cultures, local identity and autonomy, and diversification of economic activities. Finally the paper presents four categories of analysis that incorporate the principles of sustainable development and responsible tourism: the hommoecosystem, rational-intuitive use, harmonious and ethical tourism, and integrative participatory planning.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, concern about environmental issues has prompted countless studies and proposals to explain them and find solutions. All human activities generate some type of impact on the environment, and tourism is no exception. Tourism's concern with the search for solutions to its negative effects on the environment can be observed, for instance, in the preparation of plans for tourism development, in the curricula of tourism studies at schools and universities, and in scientific research; but also in the emergence of nature-oriented market segments and a general concern about minimizing the negative impact of tourism. Interest in developing more environmentally-sensitive tourism practice originated in the 1970s with the work of scholars such as Young (1973), which was later reflected in the 1980s in studies like that of Jost Krippendorf<sup>2</sup> (1989). Scholars concerned with the topic more recently include Escourrou (1993), Coriolanus (1998), Weaver (1998), Robinson and Boniface (1998), Brown (1998), Almeida (2000), Froehlich and Riedl (2000), Robinson et al. (2000), and Bartholo et al. (2009). Paradoxically, however, no integrative theoretical approaches have been developed that seek to explain or account for the tourism-environment relationship.<sup>3</sup> In other cases, it is assumed that there is such a relationship and descriptions of specific areas are made or studies of the impacts of tourism on the environment produced. Another argument is that the relationship between tourism and the environment is interdependent but studies proceed to analyse them separately rather than investigating their effects on each other. This view could be approached from within the framework of the theories of complex systems (Rolando Garcia) and complex thinking (Edgar Morin). A new proposal is thus necessary that will enable us to understand the man-nature-environment relationship as part of one complex (or system) whose parts are linked in profound ways.<sup>4</sup>

## BACKGROUND

Environmental issues “pose the need to internalize an emerging environmental knowledge across a range of disciplines, both in natural and social sciences, to build a knowledge capable of capturing the multi-causality and interdependence of processes of natural and social order” (Leff 1994:17), to form an environmental ideology based on sustainable development and rational-intuitive environmental use of the natural and cultural resources of a given community (Serrano-Barquín 2006).

Because environmental issues are issues of civilization and culture (Leff 1994; 2004), they must be tackled on several fronts.

In order to address these environmental issues the following are needed: a long-term perspective; environmental ethics; the generation of responsible attitudes and behaviour; and a culturally plural and environmentally harmonious viewpoint. To achieve this, anthropocentrism must be overcome in favour of biocentrism, which integrates the human with the ecosystem. Environmentally ethical principles are incompatible with the prevailing wasteful consumerist model with its simplistic explanations and competitiveness based on the failure of others. Sustainability is necessarily global in seeking benefits for the majority and common well-being. Success based on the failure of others is not valid here.

Based on the premise that “human and nonhuman systems are interdependent and, therefore, the challenges of conservation and development are inextricably linked” (Barrett and Arcese 1995:1073), sustainability requires the active participation of local communities to the degree of empowering local people to become the planners and executors of their own development (Bucheli 2008; Morrison 2010). This necessitates first avoiding the old model of exploitation in the name of development in which local communities saw their resources exploited and were unable to lead in or make decisions about their use; and second, local communities being able to generate and increase their own income. In contrast with old development models, local development pursues a shared responsibility for planning and using available natural, human, material and financial resources, and “provides an opportunity for society to actively confront the changes of environmental management and conservation in a meaningful way” (Barkin 1998:70; Tur 2009).

However, scientific knowledge of the tourism-development-environment relationship has not developed at the same speed, depth or extent as reality on the ground. While tourism is developing at a fantastic rate, scholars and scientific authors seem to be lagging behind, trying to understand and keep up with it. This has generated various views about the tourism-development-environment relationship. Since it should be a multidisciplinary effort, the situation presents the additional difficulty of attempting to bring together disciplines that have characteristically travelled on separate paths.

The way that scientific research has so far been approached in tourism studies has to do with an epistemological problem that has not been entirely resolved by either philosophers or scientists. The problem lies in finding a way to link two separate fields of study, the natural

sciences and the social sciences and humanities, to explain a situation that presents itself as unique, dynamic and flexible but by no means fragmented. A number of sciences are needed to study reality: each has its own research paradigm and they are often in conflict with one another. Therefore finding an analytical framework capable of linking them is a complicated task. How can phenomena whose scope transcends disciplinary boundaries and further, the frontier that has traditionally existed between “hard” and “soft” sciences, be explained? Hard sciences are generally considered the bastions of science, not allowing room for further analysis or the world views of new sciences being developed such as ecology or the human sciences. A more thorough and complete union among the sciences is needed, as pointed out by Prigogine (1998c:13): “[...] it is time for new partnerships, age-old partnerships that have been ignored for so long in the history of mankind, its society, its knowledge and the adventure of exploring nature: it is time to surrender to the evidence that nature no longer conforms to the classical paradigm at any level”.<sup>3</sup> We agree with Lovelock’s (2007:27) statement that “The scientific community is a welcoming and friendly club of specialists who follow different paths; it is a proud club and wonderfully productive, but with few certainties and hindered by its incomplete visions of the world”.

Accordingly, the study of environmental issues and the pursuit of sustainability through tourism require an interdisciplinary perspective with integrative vision. That is, we need to construct new paradigms to explain them, for: “We are nearing the limits of conventional science, but we are also at a privileged point in time: the point at which a new perspective of nature is emerging” (Prigogine 1998: 40). But not only is a new vision of nature emerging: so too is a new vision of society. Addressing this, the Faculty of Tourism and Gastronomy at UAEMex has created a line of research that aims to contribute to the construction of an alternative paradigm for the existing relationship between tourism, local development and sustainability from an environmental perspective (Serrano-Barquín 2006; 2008).

Culture is important in this context, as it is the manifestation of all actions and behaviour by man and society. Understanding the culture of a people involves capturing their normal character without reducing their particularity. Culture consists of socially established structures of meaning. A people cannot exist without a culture and no particular culture is superior to another. The semiotic concept of culture accepts this precept: in it culture is understood as a system and interaction of interpretable signs, or symbols: “Culture is a context within which all those phenomena (social events, modes of behaviour, institutions or social

processes) can be described in an intelligible manner” (Geertz 1995:27). A human society is a permanently organized population that acts in accordance with its culture and ideology. Thus tourism cannot be analyzed separately from the culture of people involved in it since, as Robinson (1998) states, in tourism conflicts are inevitable. However, tourism planned and based on ethical principles could achieve respect and harmony among different peoples and cultures (Serrano-Barquín 2006; 2008; 2009).

There is no doubt that the field of tourism studies is still dominated by positivist research (see Botterill 2001; Panosso Netto 2005; Höngg and Stephen 2006; Castillo 2007; Castillo and Panosso Netto 2010). However contributions are emerging from interpretive paradigms (Apostolopoulos 2002; Panosso Netto 2005; Tribe 2009; Castillo and Panosso Netto 2010) and some critics (Osorio 2003) provide a richer explanation and understanding of this subject (Factor-UAEM 2009). In parallel, a great diversity of methodologies can be observed. There are already examples of qualitative research from more humanistic approaches (see Spilanis and Karayiannis 2009; Dodds 2010) using dialectics, hermeneutics, phenomenology and other tools derived from psychology, philosophy and various other social and human sciences. All this leads to consideration of the appropriateness of comprehensively combining dialectic and eclectic, quantitative and qualitative methods (Walle 1997; Riley 2000; Davies 2003; Mehmetoglu 2004) to create theoretical and methodological tools that are more suited to the diversity of the tourism phenomenon, which in turn must be linked to an ideological conception of sustainability and culture. For this, an alternative paradigm is required.

For these reasons, neither the liberal nor the critical paradigms have succeeded in penetrating the analysis of environmental processes in general and their relation to tourism in particular. So far various proposals for developing research on these topics have been put forward,<sup>4</sup> but this document only refers to the integrative approach which, as it rests on more than one theoretical and disciplinary proposal, enters complex territory. Complex here is understood as that which involves the interdependent and presupposed relationship between at least two approaches, concepts, variables or phenomena. In fact, any perspective that seeks the integration of paradigms or approaches is linked to current concerns about postmodernism or the new modernity, in which the old paradigms and traditions are surpassed, broken, or overwhelmed. Reconstructions that are more extensive, flexible and inclusive are thus required, with an effort made at epistemological complexity and therefore complexity in their theoretical and methodological formulations.

This complexity implies the need for researchers to take a comprehensive and dialogical view similar to that of Morin (1999; 2001). It requires the researcher to address the study of the relationship between man and nature. In this integrative effort man is simultaneously a species, an individual, a society, and a maker of culture; and he is linked simultaneously to the phenomena that occur in nature at both the micro and the macro level.<sup>5</sup>

## **TOWARDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

Most tourism studies are performed from the administrative and economic fields and they most commonly address the quantification of tourists entering or exiting a location, the income generated by tourism and foreign exchange and/or the number of jobs created. In tourism marketing studies measurement and evaluation similarly predominate. Although in recent years cultural and environmental variables have been incorporated (Sotiropoulou 2007; Spanou 2007), in particular from the sustainability approach, the positivist perspective is still prioritized in studies. For us the overriding interest of the tourism market in increasing its economic gain, often overlooking or concealing its negative impacts, is incomprehensible.

In this proposal, sustainability is deemed a continuous process towards the higher stages of human development rather than a goal to be attained and maintained. But is not only sustainability that must be explained. Environmental issues transcend the limits of any discipline and require new approaches, methodologies and alternative or complementary theories to build a new discipline: a new environmental science.

For this it is important to reconsider the values and ethical principles that govern today's society, to redefine the type of development that characterizes "Western culture" and propose another, based on environmental ethics that re-evaluate nature and the individual. Respect for the former and the latter is where this new model should begin. Even the model of tourism developed around nature, ecotourism, is criticized by authors such as Butcher (2009), who states that "ecotourism" is only used to exploit the new needs of tourists and maximize profits for the enterprises involved. In this way a type of tourism that could be ethical develops into unethical tourism. Butcher proposes a theory of tourism counter to the types of tourism that have mainly become a means of maximizing profits. Innovative approaches have appeared in Latin America, for example in Mexico (Nieves 2003) and Brazil (Bartholo et.

al. 2009), and the World Tourism Organization, UNWTO, has released books such as *Sustainable Development of Ecotourism* (2004).

This paper proposes an environmental perspective underpinned by a holistic approach that regards the environment as a complex system consisting of both nature and society which together make a whole. It sees natural and social phenomena, each with its own dynamics, as inextricably linked with varying degrees of intensity. This view differs from the holistic approach considered by general systems theory and other positivist proposals which consider at best a partial subsystem as they conduct their analysis without taking into account the complex system that is the environment. That is, they try to maintain the equilibrium of the system through knowledge of the laws that govern its behaviour. The holistic view studies a phenomenon as part of the complex nature-society system, or environment. This is not about returning to traditional reductionism, but it must be acknowledged that it may not be possible to incorporate all elements, components, relationships and impacts that create a phenomenon. It is necessary to set limits to a complex system, from its scale to the elements considered basic to its analysis, incorporating both natural and social aspects. While this may be complex, it does not have to be complicated.

Thus we seek to understand the behaviour of the system to try to direct it towards the common goals set by communities themselves in the understanding that it is not possible to manipulate the environment because there are multiple possibilities for interference such as fluctuations and shocks that preclude the possibility of an absolute state of equilibrium or permanent stability. This is the point at which the real debate between the hard and other sciences lies. The complex system is constantly evolving in function of its flexibility and capacity for self-organization. These are open systems in which the processes are irreversible. Trying to assess and establish a universal methodology to prove that a system is sustainable, as the classical sciences would attempt, would be futile. And the complex system involved (macro, micro) will present different natural and cultural conditions, which preclude the positivist establishment of general laws and precise prognoses. By sustainability we mean not only nature but also the environment: i.e. the economy, society and culture (see also Baros and Dávid 2007). Given these considerations, as Prigogine (1998:412) argues, “we cannot hope to predict the future but we can influence it. The extent to which deterministic predictions are not possible makes it likely that visions of the future, and even utopias, play an important role in its construction.

The proposed methodology attempts to apply the concepts and theoretical aspects of complex systems and sustainability on the one hand, and on the other, to establish a basic model for local sustainable development planning, starting from a tourism project. The proposed categories of analysis have been derived from the principles presented below.

## Principles

- Principle of sustainability: based on the ideology or assumed cultural understanding of environment. Activities carried out in a geographical area are conducive to conditions that improve the quality of the environment (natural and socio-cultural) in a permanent and irreversible process of evolution.
- Principle of complementarity: epistemologically seeks to promote complementarity of theories and methodologies as well as to promote the diversification of activities that stimulate self-sufficiency, based on local communities' self-determination.
- Principle of complex systems: society is an inseparable socio-cultural subsystem, interrelated to and interdependent of the natural subsystem. Together, they constitute a hommoecosystem.

These principles have been taken and redefined from scholars such as Enrique Leff (1990; 1994; 2000; 2002) and David Barkin (1998; 2000; 2001) (the principle of sustainability); Edgar Morin (1999; 2001; 2004) (complementarity) and Rolando Garcia (1986; 1988; 1994) (complex systems). From these principles we derive the proposed four categories for analysis, which are presented as symbolic, conceptual and contextual representations on which to continue working and building.

## Categories

1. *Hommoecosystem*. As explained, society and nature cannot be seen as detached from one another as if nature were there only to be used or exploited. Since the sixteenth century mankind in general has placed itself at the centre of the universe (anthropocentrism) and in opposition to nature. However, indigenous communities believe that man and nature are part of the same world, or system. We have much to learn from these peoples, who are often regarded as “backward”. In this context we propose the hommoecosystem category as a complex system linking society and nature inextricably and composed of the natural and socio-

cultural subsystems that are interdependent and in an ongoing process of evolution and construction.

2. *Rational-intuitive environmental use.* This concept may sound simple and obvious. It refers to the way in which the environment should be approached. Its use should be based on the human perception of the importance of this natural and cultural heritage and on the human perception of the rational being, to understand and overcome the challenges s/he imposes with regard to nature and society. The use of the environment ceased to be rational-intuitive with the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century. Rational-intuitive environmental use of natural and cultural resources is therefore proposed. Such use would be in accordance with the characteristics of the resources and of the region concerned, based on scientific knowledge generated by research at institutions of higher education *and* traditional intuitive knowledge derived from the experience, senses and feelings of the local people according to their culture, for the benefit of the community, without endangering their existence and possibly even improving it. That is, resources can be used, restored, preserved and protected through the activities they support or promote, from a perspective of environmental rationality. In this context, tourism and other activities should be part of environmental planning programs and instruments in harmony with the environment.

3. *Harmonious and ethical tourism.* A model of tourism that values humankind and is based on a complex perspective should be promoted. In this context, harmonious tourism is proposed as a central activity to drive local development. It aims to rescue and protect natural and cultural resources, favouring the presence of ecosystems and their basic biological processes and generating social and economic benefits to promote better living standards for local communities and visitors based on the rational-intuitive environmental use of resources. At the same time it would seek to complement primary, secondary, service-oriented and trade activities. This complementarity is an advantage to exploit because it is thus possible to link the various economic activities of the population to respond to employment needs and thereby achieve better livelihoods. This is a common goal of local development, in which the organization and implementation of initiatives come from the communities and use their own resources.

4. *Integrative participatory planning* is proposed as a method by which to implement the above categories. It integrates the various economic sectors in the elaboration of a local sustainable development plan, with harmonious tourism its structuring axis. Such a development

plan calls for the participation of government agencies (federal, state, municipal, local) and representatives of the community or communities involved, so that, based on national and regional existing programs, local programs are developed to complement rather than oppose the principles of sustainability and of the various economic sectors. The involvement of multiple actors from local communities is crucial to the elaboration of these local sustainable development plans, which should take into account the regional micro and macro context in order to increase their chance of success.

The proposed activities are carried out in a geographical space as the material support on which man and his work operate. But integrative participatory planning goes beyond the deterministic idea of relying solely on such geographical space. Here it is combined with the concept of the environment as the complex system in which society and nature interact in a dialectic process of interdependence, as two interrelated subsystems that cannot be separated. The scale of analysis of this complex system is variable. The concept of region is taken as a theoretical resource that allows delimiting a macro or micro complex system as a space created by mankind that reflects its culture but is built on a natural space governed by its own laws, facts and phenomena, which are altered by people's actions. The organization of the regional space also reflects the social processes and hierarchy of the economic and political systems of each region, establishing relationships between the various elements of its structure. At the same time it maintains relations with the outside and is subject to the influences of its surroundings while, in turn, influencing them. Hence the difficulty of predicting the future of complex systems, as there are a myriad of factors and phenomena that can intervene in the functioning of the complex system: in the social subsystem – e.g. political, economic, social, cultural and technological – and in the natural subsystem – floods, drought, earthquakes and many more – which would call for mechanisms of resistance, recovery or adaptation of the system to be put in place. This would make it virtually impossible to predict with certainty how each system would react to similar interventions, whether external or internal.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It should be noted that the concept of sustainable tourism is being overtaken by the concept of responsible tourism, and to the authors of this article by that of harmonious tourism. It is not enough for tourism to be sustainable: it must be responsible and in harmony with its environment.

This new concept comprises the proposal developed here, derived from an understanding of the hommoecosystem, rational-intuitive environmental use, ethical and harmonious tourism and integrative participatory planning. The predatory practices of tourism are being overcome, albeit in a modest way. However, new groups of researchers and planners emphasize the importance of developing responsible tourism with the participation of local communities, especially in poor and developing countries.

New practices of tourism are being created in various parts of the world that empower local people to make decisions, administer and regulate the action at the local level. As a result, communities living along river banks, in meadows, on beaches, in small inner cities and indigenous communities have the freedom and autonomy to say “yes” or “no” to tourism.

The authors believe that more decisive action must be taken towards creating harmonious tourism practices that are socially, culturally, ecologically, economically, politically, ethically and morally harmonious. The decision is up to every man and woman. There is still much to do, but we must ensure that action is taken.

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## ENDNOTES

1. This article is derived from the research project “Harmonious tourism, an alternative to local sustainable development: Theoretical-methodological proposal from the Complex thinking”, financed by CONACyT.
2. The environment is understood as the complex system in which nature and society interact as two interrelated and interdependent subsystems in a dialectical process. Thus we perceive man and nature as inextricably linked elements of the same complex.
3. Most references cited here are in Spanish: the quotes presented here are authors’ translations.
4. Micro-subjective approaches from the individual internal perception of nature by men. Micro-objective approaches from man as social subjects (phenomenological-structurationist, comprehensive and culturally anthropological stances) versus nature. Macro-objective approaches, from

- society as objective reality to man (structuralist stance, economic analysis, among others) and their impact on nature. Macro-subjective approaches, from the subjective constructions that form the society regarding nature (norms, culture and values). From the eclectic, integrationist perspectives of various approaches (postmodern and integrative proposals in social sciences). From any of these approaches, the priority lies with man, not nature, so it is valid and advisable to select methods supported by all the disciplines of the social sciences and its intra-disciplinary positions.
5. Various efforts have been made to build such complex approaches which can be grouped into two integrationist strategies: a) through the creation of multi- and interdisciplinary groups: the study of tourism and its relationship to nature by groups of specialists from various fields; b) creating new fields of analysis that transcend disciplinary boundaries: complex thinking (Luhmann, 1997; Morin, 1999, 2001, 2004; Leff, 1994, 2000, 2004; Garcia, 1986, 1994, 2000). This would involve viewing tourism and its relationship with nature as a field of study in itself, and although this has not been raised by tourism scholars in these terms it has been included in environmental studies in places where tourism appears as an economic activity.

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