The Routledge Handbook of Tourism and the Environment

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Responsible tourism

Publication details

https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203121108.ch36

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Published online on: 02 Jul 2012

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Responsible tourism

Whose responsibility?

Richard Sharpley

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Introduction

The concept of responsible tourism is not new. More than 20 years ago, for example, Haywood (1988) was exploring the idea of 'responsible and responsive tourism planning' while Richter (1989: viii), in the preface to a book on the politics of tourism in Asia, made reference to a 'Centre for Responsible Tourism'. In fact, by the early 1990s, the term 'responsible tourism' had become synonymous with environmentally and socially appropriate forms of tourism in general and with alternative (to mass) forms of tourism in particular. In other words, as concern over the negative environmental and socio-cultural consequences of mass tourism became more widespread, responsible tourism became increasingly used by both proponents and critics as a collective descriptor of alternative forms of tourism (Cooper and Ozdil 1992; Harrison and Husbands 1996; Wheeller 1991). In short, responsible tourism was broadly synonymous with what, at that time, came to be referred to somewhat narrowly as sustainable tourism (Sharpley 2009).

More recently, however, it has been promoted as a conceptually distinctive approach to all forms of tourism that, although sharing the objectives of sustainable tourism, firmly places the emphasis on the needs of all stakeholders, including tourism businesses and tourists themselves, to take responsibility for their roles and actions in tourism (Goodwin 2009). At the same time, it has evolved as a tourism product or, more precisely, as a brand. In 2001, for example, www. responsibletravel.com was launched as the world's first dedicated online travel agent specialising in responsible holidays and now claims to offer 'the largest selection of responsible holidays anywhere on the web' (www.responsibletravel.com 2010a). Moreover, responsible tourism or, more specifically, responsible tourism business practice, has also become an objective for many tourism businesses, primarily in the UK but also elsewhere. Not only has the UK's Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO) been committed to promoting responsible tourism since 2000 among its members (and, indeed, requiring adherence to its responsible tourism guidelines as a criterion of membership – AITO 2010), but also many tour operators, both independent and mainstream, have adopted the principles of responsible tourism (Table 36.1), in some cases explicitly through the appointment of a Responsible Tourism Manager. In short, responsible tourism has evolved into a tourism-specific manifestation of what is more broadly

referred to as corporate social responsibility (CSR), the successful achievement of which by particular organisations and businesses is recognised by the annual Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards. Thus, responsible tourism, as a sustainable approach to the practice of tourism, appears to have achieved recognition and acceptance both by the tourism sector and also, as claimed by its proponents, among tourists themselves (Goodwin and Francis 2003). As a consequence, it could be argued that it represents a valid and effective means of not only mitigating tourism's negative environmental consequences, but also of enhancing the benefits of tourism to destinations, businesses and tourists alike.

Nevertheless, significant debate continues to surround the concept of responsible tourism with respect to both how it may be defined and, in particular, its specific focus on 'responsibility'. In turn, this suggests that the environmental credentials of responsible tourism as a sustainable approach to the practice of tourism may be questioned. The purpose of this chapter is to do just that. Specifically, it explores the extent to which stakeholders, in particular tourists, are amenable or responsive to messages of responsibility and, hence, the extent to which they seek out (as a niche product) or engage in (as a behavioural mode) responsible tourism for positive environmental reasons or concern. The first task, however, is to review briefly contemporary definitions of responsible tourism.

What is responsible tourism?

Responsible tourism may be variously defined. For example, Éveil, a French responsible tourism network, defines it as:

> a tourism or leisure activity implementing practices that are respectful of natural and cultural environment and which contributes in an ethical manner to the local economic development. It therefore favors the tourist awareness concerning his [sic] own impacts on the local territory and makes him an actor of his consumption.
>
> *(Éveil 2010)*

Thus, the emphasis here is very much on tourists being aware of their impacts and responding appropriately. A similar definition is provided by www.responsibletravel.org, although equal if not more emphasis is placed on the experience of tourists themselves – responsible travel is seen as means of self-fulfilment:

> Responsible travel is a new way of travelling for those who've had enough of mass tourism. It's about respecting and benefiting local people and the environment – but it's about far more than that. If you travel for relaxation, fulfilment, discovery, adventure and to learn – rather than simply to tick off 'places and things' – then responsible travel is for you.
>
> *(www.responsibletravel.com 2010b).*

In other words, responsible travel is primarily travel that cannot be labelled as 'mass tourism'; it is sold or promoted, effectively as a niche product, on the basis of the experience that responsible tourists desire or might expect, thus appealing to those who seek (whether for altruistic or more egotistical reasons) distinctive or non-mass produced holidays.

Conversely, Harold Goodwin, the leading proponent of the contemporary responsible tourism movement and a driving force behind its adoption in industry and policy circles (as well as the development of related research and education through the International Centre for Responsible Tourism), defines it more broadly. He suggests, somewhat vaguely, that responsible

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tourism is about making 'better places for people to live, and better places for people to visit' (Goodwin 2009: 12), although goes on to state more specifically that the realisation of these aspirations is dependent on 'all stakeholders taking responsibility for creating better forms of tourism'. Similarly, the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism (ICRT 2010), the only formal policy document concerned with defining responsible tourism, states that 'it is the responsibility of all stakeholders in tourism to achieve more sustainable forms of tourism'. The Declaration defines responsible tourism according to its characteristics, as shown in Table 36.1 below.

Two things are immediately evident from Table 36.1. First, responsible tourism is defined very much by its potential outcomes, not by the processes or procedures necessary to achieve those outcomes, although the Declaration does provide guidelines for economic, social and environmental responsibility. As can be seen from Table 36.2, however, these are not dissimilar from the principles or guidelines that have long been proposed for enhancing the environmental sustainability of tourism development more generally (see, for an early example, ETB 1991). Thus, it is not clear how responsible tourism or, more precisely, responsibility, might be achieved.

Second, and following on from this point, the characteristics of responsible tourism summarised in Table 36.1 may equally be thought of as the characteristics of sustainable tourism. In

Table 36.1 Characteristics of responsible tourism

Responsible tourism:
- minimises negative economic, environmental, and social impacts;
- generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry; involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances;
- makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world's diversity;
- provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues;
- provides access for physically challenged people; and
- is culturally sensitive, engenders respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence.

Source: ICRT (2010).

Table 36.2 Guiding principles for environmental responsibility

- Assess environmental impacts throughout the life cycle of tourist establishments and operations – including the planning and design phase – and ensure that negative impacts are reduced to the minimum and maximising positive ones.
- Use resources sustainably, and reduce waste and over-consumption.
- Manage natural diversity sustainably, and where appropriate restore it; and consider the volume and type of tourism that the environment can support, and respect the integrity of vulnerable ecosystems and protected areas.
- Promote education and awareness for sustainable development – for all stakeholders.
- Raise the capacity of all stakeholders and ensure that best practice is followed, for this purpose consult with environmental and conservation experts.

Source: ICRT (2010).

other words, the distinction between the two concepts is somewhat fuzzy, particularly as both share the same goal, namely, sustainable development (and, to further confuse the debate, contemporary approaches to sustainable tourism seek to affect change in all forms of tourism, including mass tourism, whereas some consider responsible tourism to be a solution – or at least an alternative – to mass tourism). It is claimed that the difference between the two lies, unsurprisingly, in the notion of responsibility: 'the major difference between the two is that, in responsible tourism, individuals, organisations and businesses are asked to take responsibility for their actions and the impacts of their actions' (Wikipedia 2010)[1], whereas, allegedly, progress towards the achievement of sustainable tourism has been hindered by an unwillingness of stakeholders to take responsibility for their own actions. That is, sustainability is seen to be someone else's problem. Whether this is the case or not remains debatable but what is certain is that responsible tourism, as defined by Goodwin, addresses what is widely considered to be the single greatest challenge to the achievement of sustainable tourism and sustainable development more generally, namely, a 'transformation in social values and lifestyles in general and the 'adoption' of responsible consumption in particular' (Sharpley 2009: 78; Porritt 2007).

As this chapter will go on to suggest, this ambition to encourage responsibility is, on the one hand, both logical and desirable; as the IUCN's (1991) document *Caring for the Earth* proposed, progress towards sustainable development is dependent on the adoption of more sustainable lifestyles for, as Ludwig *et al.* (1993) succinctly argue, 'resource problems are not really environmental problems; they are human problems'. On the other hand, it may be seen as idealistic to ignore the realities of contemporary production and consumption systems to seek such a fundamental shift in values. The point here, however, is that, conceptually, responsible tourism is not distinct *from* but a requirement *of* sustainable tourism development; moreover, as a term it is also used interchangeably with other manifestations of sustainable tourism. For example, The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as 'Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people' (TIES 2010), whereas others have suggested that 'true' ecotourism (however that may be defined) should in fact be redefined as responsible tourism in order to distinguish it from 'irresponsible ecotourism' (Russell and Wallace 2004). Similarly, in a special issue of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* in 2008, focusing on research perspectives on responsible tourism, papers addressed a variety of issues broadly related to sustainability and sustainable tourism, including sustainable supply chain management (Schwartz *et al.* 2008), justice tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles 2008) and ecotourism in Madagascar (Duffy 2008). In short, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish responsible tourism from the concept of sustainable tourism more generally. Indeed, it is one of a number of words or terms that, as VisitBritain (the UK's national tourism body) observes, are 'used to describe what is essentially the same thing – tourism that seeks to minimise its negative impacts on the environment and society' (VisitBritain 2010). Accordingly, the organisation goes on to define responsible tourism as 'the closest definition to sustainable tourism; however, it tends to refer to the consumers' choice of destination and mode of transport based on their ethical, political and racial sensitivities as well as being concerned for the environment and local culture' (ibid. 2010).

Thus, the concept of responsible tourism remains problematic, not least because of definitional difficulties. In particular, however, it is value-laden. In other words, although it may be manifested in sets of guiding principles, such as those proposed in the 2002 Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism (Table 36.2), or in operational guidelines and codes of conduct, in itself it does not represent a practical approach to developing and managing tourism within environmental parameters. Rather, it is, in a sense, a philosophy or, more precisely, a movement (Goodwin 2009: 13), the aim of which is to encourage responsible behaviour – or,

to reveal its moralising foundation, to discourage irresponsible behaviour because, implicitly, to not engage with responsible tourism is to be an irresponsible tourist or tourism business (Butcher 2002). In other words, the objective of responsible tourism is, by definition, to change the ways in which tourists, businesses and other stakeholders behave, to encourage them to become 'responsible'. The question then to be addressed is, how likely is such a transformation in attitudes, values and behaviour, particularly among tourists themselves, likely to occur?

Responsibility in tourism

The promotion of responsible tourism is typically justified on the basis of two related arguments. First, it has long been suggested that the characteristics of the demand for tourism are undergoing a transformation; the conventional or 'old' tourist (Poon 1993), who was satisfied with a homogeneous, predictable, passive, sun–sea–sand type holiday experience, is allegedly being replaced by the 'new' tourist who is more experienced, independent and flexible, who seeks individual quality experiences that educate, are different and are environmentally benign. At the same time, according to Poon (1993: 145), the 'new' tourist also knows how to behave, how to consume tourism 'correctly' or responsibly – and if they do not, then advice has long been available on how to be a 'good' tourist (Wood and House 1991; more recently, Popescu 2008). Second, responsible tourism makes good business sense (Goodwin 2009). Not only does the alleged increase in demand for responsible holidays among enlightened 'new' tourists represent a significant market opportunity, but tourism businesses themselves have the potential to benefit from the widely claimed benefits of doing 'green business', such as cost-savings, competitive advantage, marketing and PR (that is, being seen to be responsible), as well as meeting CSR objectives and underpinning future business through contributing to the environmental and social sustainability of destinations.

There is undoubtedly evidence to support both arguments. For example, a number of organisations, such as the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), have long been popular among people wishing to engage in conservation and other charitable work while on holiday and nowadays volunteer tourism, or 'voluntourism' as it is now widely referred to, is a recognised and growing market sector (Mustonen 2005; Wearing 2001) – although the values and motivations of 'voluntourists' may vary significantly (Daldeniaz and Hampton 2010). Equally, demand for special interest, adventure, activity and, more generally, 'responsible' holidays is undoubtedly on the increase. For example, it has been reported that, in 2006, over one million responsible holidays were taken, with future annual growth of 25 per cent predicted (Goodwin 2007). Again, however, the values and motivations of such tourists are complex, varied and uncertain, and research has demonstrated that the onus may fall on destinations to encourage or ensure environmentally appropriate behaviour on the part of their visitors (Stanford 2008). Equally, there is also no doubt that numerous businesses and other organisations within the tourism sector are increasingly adopting responsible practices, whether in the context of day-to-day business operations or supporting development, education, health care and other projects at the destinational level. At the time of writing, for example, the 2010 Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards had received over 1,700 nominations from more than 600 organisations and, as referred to in the introduction to this chapter, many tour operators and other tourism businesses have explicitly adopted the principles of responsible tourism. Nevertheless, it must be stated, of course, that as impressive as these figures are with respect to the demand for responsible holidays and responsible business activity, they represent only a small proportion of total tourism activity. In 2009 UK residents made almost 59 million trips abroad. At the same time, there is also contradictory evidence with respect to tourism

businesses' commitment to responsible practice; a recent survey found that only around one-third of travel agents and tour operators believe that 'the travel industry has a role to play in limiting global warming' (Taylor 2008).

However, of particular relevance to this chapter is the extent to which the alleged emergence of the 'new', environmentally aware tourist is manifested in reality. In other words, it may be argued that the success of responsible tourism, or the achievement of environmentally benign or sustainable tourism practices, is largely dependent on tourists adapting or modifying their behaviour according to genuine environmental values rather than for other reasons, such as guilt-avoidance or ego-enhancement (Munt 1994). That is, the consumption of a 'responsible holiday' may not be motivated by strong environmental values, nor may it be characterised by responsible behaviour on the part of tourists while at the destination.

For example, and as explored in more detail elsewhere (Sharpley 2006), the relatively limited research into the motivations and benefits sought by ecotourists (that is, people participating in touristic activities that conform to definitions of ecotourism) reveals that the 'true' ecotourist is less numerous than might be assumed. Blamey and Braithwaite's (1997) research, for instance, concluded that the majority of potential ecotourists do not hold particularly green values, and Palacio and McCool (1997) found that, according to their criteria, less than 20 per cent of a sample of tourists in Belize, renowned as an ecotourism destination, could be considered ecotourists. Other research has similarly demonstrated that there exist wide-ranging preferences and behaviour among ecotourists but that, generally, the natural environment and opportunities for active rather than passive participation are fundamental factors in the demand for and satisfaction with ecotourism experiences (Holden and Sparrowhawk 2002; Wight 1996). In other words, ecotourists seek the personal benefits of the enjoyment of nature; conversely, there is little or no evidence that they are motivated by or behave according to environmental or responsible values.

Of course, the outcomes of research into ecotourism, as a specific market segment, are not necessarily representative of responsible tourism more generally, whereas the environmental credentials of many ecotourism products are questioned in many quarters. Indeed, as is now discussed, proponents of responsible tourism draw on research into consumers' environmental attitudes in general and tourists environmental/ethical values in particular as evidence of increasing responsibility inherent in tourist-consumer behaviour.

The responsible tourist?

Since the early 1990s, successive surveys in the UK have identified an increasing incidence of green or responsible attitudes on the part of consumers. For example, it was found that increasing numbers of people considered themselves to be either 'dark green' (that is, 'always or as far as possible buy environmentally friendly products') or 'pale green' (that is, 'buy if I see them') consumers (Mintel 1994). A subsequent survey by the same organisation (Mintel 2007) found that green consumerism was continuing to become more widespread, although consumers are more likely to buy environmentally friendly products to feel good about themselves rather than for altruistic reasons. Interestingly, a more recent study revealed that people who are exposed to green products, such as looking at them on a website, subsequently behave more altruistically than those who actually buy the products. The implication of this study was that the act of purchasing may make people feel that they have 'done their good deed' and thus may act less altruistically when presented with other ethical dilemmas (Mazar and Zhong 2010). Importantly, in the context of tourism, this may imply, of course, that the act of buying a responsible holiday may absolve tourists from any sense of responsibility while actually on holiday, a point that has long been made: 'Responsible tourism is a so-called solution that keeps everyone happy. It

appeases the guilt of the 'thinking tourist' while simultaneously providing the holiday experience they or we want' (Wheeller 1991: 96).

With respect to research that specifically explores the ethical dimension of tourism consumption, surveys again suggest that tourists may favour tour operators or other businesses with strong environmental or ethical credentials. A survey by the charity Tearfund, for example, found that although affordability, good weather and a good hotel were key attributes that were accorded highest importance in buying a holiday, significant importance was attached to the fact that the holiday was designed to minimise environmental impacts and that a company had ethical policies. Moreover, 59 per cent of respondents stated that they would be happy to pay more for their holidays if the extra money were to contribute to higher local wages, environmental conservation and so on (Goodwin and Francis 2003). Similarly, other research has revealed that 64 per cent of UK tourists believe that tourism causes some degree of damage to the environment and that, generally, they would be willing to pay more for an environmentally appropriate tourism product (Diamantis 1999).

Conversely, other research has consistently demonstrated that tourism is relatively immune to environmental concerns (or that 'responsible' tourist behaviour is motivated by factors other than environmental concern). For example, in a recent poll, just 1 per cent of tourists stated that their carbon footprint was an important factor when deciding on a holiday purchase, whereas cost is the most important consideration for 43 per cent of tourists (Skidmore 2008). Even despite the growing awareness of climate change, research has shown that this is having little or no impact on travel behaviour. For example, one study found that the few people who expected to fly less frequently in the future would do so as a result of a change in personal circumstances rather than because of concerns over the environmental impacts of aviation (CAA 2008: 49). Thus, despite the long-held belief that tourists are demanding 'greener' holidays, the evidence suggests that environmental concern remains low on their list of priorities when actually purchasing holiday or travel experiences.

Underpinning these more negative findings is widespread recognition of what might be termed the value–action or intention–action gap. That is, a distinction frequently exists between aspiration (what consumers say they would do) and what they actually do in practice. Research has increasingly demonstrated that the link between general environmental awareness (which itself may be diminishing in importance compared with other issues, such as terrorism and security) and green consumerism in particular is tenuous. Not only is the widespread adherence to green purchasing behaviour, as suggested in surveys, rarely witnessed in practice, but there is a lack of clarity over the meaning of green consumerism or how it may be manifested (Peattie 1999). Consumers address environmental issues in complex and ambivalent ways (Macnaghten and Urry 1998) and, as a result, their consumer behaviour is frequently contradictory and compromises may be made between ethical values, product performance, cost and so on. In the case of tourism, given its high economic value and its significance as a form of consumption, such compromises may well be made and, overall, there is little concrete evidence to suggest that the demand for responsible tourism and other forms of alternative or appropriate tourism can be related directly to increased environmental concern.

In addition, consideration must also be given to both the motivation for participation in tourism and its meaning as a form of consumption when addressing tourists' potential responsiveness to the 'responsibility' message. Indeed, applying knowledge and understanding of tourism motivation and consumption may go some way to explaining the ambivalence of tourists towards environmental concerns or why 'relatively few tourists seem to make decisions based on environmental concerns' (Swarbrooke and Horner 1999: 204). It is not possible to explore these issues here in detail but two points are of fundamental relevance to the arguments

in this chapter. First, tourist motivation is complex, dynamic and potentially determined by a variety of person-specific psychological factors and extrinsic social forces. That is, a number of different pressures and influences may shape the needs and wants of tourists at any one time. Nevertheless, most commentators suggest that tourists are motivated primarily by, on the one hand, a desire to escape – as van Rekom (1994) suggests, 'a central need which has been revealed time and time again in empirical research is the "escape" notion' – and, on the other hand, by the potential rewards of participating in tourism. Such rewards may be personal, inter-personal, psychological or physical and, collectively described as 'ego-enhancement'. In other words, tourism represents a form of self-reward or self-indulgence.

Second, people consume tourism in a variety of ways; that is, as a specific form of consumption, tourism embraces a number of different meanings, principal among which is the creation of self-identity (Sharpley 2008). Other means of consumption include 'play' (that is, the opportunity to experience tourism with other tourists, perhaps in liminal contexts) and, reflecting the contemporary significance of tourism, as relaxation, fun and hedonism. Undoubtedly, tourists may also attempt to integrate themselves with the object of consumption (that is, behave in a manner appropriate to destination environment and communities), although, as already demonstrated, this is likely to be the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, as has long been argued (Wheeller 1991, 1993), the consumption of responsible tourism may be driven more by 'ego' than eco-concerns, while, more generally, by succumbing to green-washing, so-called responsible tourists may in fact be contributing to the continued spread of mass tourism.

Conclusion

What are the implications then, for the potential success of viability of responsible tourism as a means enhancing tourism's contribution to sustainable development generally, and its environmental sustainability in particular? As noted earlier in the chapter, the encouragement of responsibility in the practice of tourism (both production and consumption) is both logical and desirable, not least because, as is widely accepted, sustainability in general is dependent on the adoption of sustainable (that is, responsible) lifestyles. However, as research consistently shows, stated intentions of responsible consumer behaviour are rarely reflected in practice whereas the motivation for and significance of tourism as a specific form of consumption suggest that the promotion of responsibility faces major challenges. To put it simply, to be a responsible tourist requires 'working' at tourism, which contradicts, for most tourists, its fundamental purpose. Thus, to conclude, efforts may be better directed at those people and organisations involved in the planning, management and, indeed, legislation of tourism; in general, sound or responsible environmental practice results more often than not from control and legislation. In other words, to expect widespread adoption of responsible behaviour among tourists is, perhaps, to ignore the realities of tourist consumption.

Note

1 Although entries on Wikipedia are anonymous and not subject to validation or peer review, this reference provides a concise and accurate definition and explanation of responsible tourism.

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