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# **Undoing conventional framings of tourism sustainability**

**By**

**Eva Duedahl and Janne Liburd**

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## Undoing conventional framings of tourism sustainability

**Abstract:** This TIC TALK contribution critically questions conceptualisations of post-pandemic tourism recovery and resilience to alternatively suggest how future research may begin undoing conventional framings of tourism sustainability.

**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism development; COVID-19; resilience

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The global outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19) has been widely acknowledged for providing the tourism industry the much-needed shock to bounce onto a ‘new normal’ better aligned with sustainability. While the COVID-19 pandemic is still unfolding, early conceptualisations of tourism recovery and resilience are traceable through range of abductive tensions that re-set, re-boot, re-discover, re-define, re-imagine, re-calibrate, re-generate, re-make and re-think tourism and its relations to sustainability. These variations of interpretations of tourism recovery and resilience principally spin around ideas of growing or de-growing; returning or reforming tourism, and what the implications might be (e.g., Schweinsberg, Fennell & Hassanli, 2021). Tourism scholars appear to have united behind two key arguments that (1) pre-pandemic tourism was unsustainable, and (2) something needs to change (e.g., Lew et al., 2020).

In this research note we argue that the accelerated applications of resilience to reduce the unsustainability of tourism direct attention away from the broader underlying problems that make it necessary for tourism destinations and civic society to become resilient in the first place. We briefly unfold some of the inherent premises of resilience and next elaborate on the problematic implications before positioning how future research may begin undoing conventional framings of tourism sustainability.

## **2. TOURISM RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE**

Resilience originates from the late 16th century Latin word ‘resilio’, which refers to the ability of a system to spring back, rebound, or bounce back to a normal state or equilibrium in response to events of change, stress, and shock (e.g., Hall, Prayag & Amore, 2017).

Resilience theory accordingly positions that because all things change over time systems, whether a single entity, tourism, or the entire planet, must find ways of adapting to their changing context, or perish (Lew, Cheer, Haywood, Brouder & Salazar, 2020). Resilience is captured as:

The capacity of individuals, communities and systems to survive, adapt and grow in the face of stress and shocks, and even transform when conditions require it. Building resilience is about making people, communities and systems better prepared to withstand

catastrophic events – both natural and manmade – and able to bounce back more quickly and emerge stronger from these shocks and stresses (Rockefeller Foundation, 2016 cited in e.g., Hall et al., 2017, p. 47)

Aligned with these characteristics, global tourism has been viewed as one of the most resilient activities capable of quickly bouncing back from a multitude of local, regional and global crises (McKercher, 2021). While COVID-19 provided a shock for the tourism industry and a need to bounce back, or forth to a ‘new normal’, will it become more sustainable? What made the industry so vulnerable, even if resilient? Why were individual destinations, countries, and the international community not better prepared? How and what kind of changes are needed for tourism to mitigate harm from future risks?

### **3. BEYOND RESILIENCE**

Principally a systems property, resilience says little if anything about whether the range of post- pandemic tourism scenarios envisioned are good or bad, better, or worse, nor to whom. For instance, invasive species that cause large-scale rupturing changes to existing ecosystems remain the quintessential living example of resilient communities. On human resilience, Kaika (2017) points to the President of the Louisiana Justice Institute, Tracie Washington. Part of a public New Orleans campaign, Washington insisted that policymakers and the media stopped calling Hurricane Katrina and the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill victims ‘resilient’:

Every time you say, “Oh, they’re resilient, [it actually] means you can do something else, [something] new to [my community]. ... We were not born to be resilient; we are conditioned to be resilient. I don’t want to be resilient .... [I want to] fix the things that [create the need for us to] be resilient [in the first place] (p. 95)

Washington’s objection to being called resilient speaks to current understandings of resilience in tourism, which explicitly or implicitly centres around making people, communities and systems better prepared to withstand catastrophic events; being able to bounce back better, more quickly, stronger; and being able to survive and even thrive no matter the type of shock or stress. By implication civic society should be able handle further future suffering and environmental degradation. The consequence of Washington’s objection

would be to stop focusing on how to make tourism destinations more resilient ‘no matter what stresses they encounter’. Such shift might encourage tourism researchers and practitioners to direct attention toward the underlying root problems that make it necessary for people and environments to become resilient in the first place.

The still unfolding COVID-19 pandemic represents not only a tourism crisis. Rather, being a global health crisis, COVID-19 has exposed and, in several cases, augmented existing environmental, social, economic, and political crises that further undermine commitment and progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were already off track before COVID-19 (e.g. Rastegar, Higgins-Desbiolles & Ruhanen, 2021). Already between 1977-1984, three UN Commissions were given mandate to address the rising predicament of the environment and development and established an interlocking crisis of the global commons (Liburd, Duedahl & Heape, 2020, p. 3). Today, COVID-19 has accentuated how the vexing challenges of poverty, inequality, health, well-being, and climate change remain interlocked, interrelated, and interconnected.

As tourism can be considered a lens through which one can begin understanding contemporary society (Liburd & Edwards, 2018; MacCannell, 1973), COVID-19 has revealed a highly unequal and unjust world. Consider the strikingly uneven COVID-19 vaccine rollout across the globe. In January 2021 a \$50,000 (USD) package holiday went on sale. Included is transportation by private jet to Dubai where the customer receives a COVID-19 vaccine at a private facility and 30 nights of accommodation while they wait for their second dose (Robson, 2021). In addition, Emirates Airlines offers \$1,800 (USD) to help cover funeral costs in case the traveller dies from the virus. By contrast, affluent Western countries have started injecting a 3rd ‘booster’ vaccine. In September 2021 the World Health Organisation reported that only 2-3% of the more than five billion doses given globally have been administered in Africa and in the absence of vaccines. Each hour, 26 Africans die from COVID-19 (WHO, 2021).

#### **4. UNDOING CONVENTIONAL FRAMINGS OF TOURISM SUSTAINABILITY**

The international community has entered the critical decade of actual delivery on the transformative pledge made in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to: “Shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path by 2030” (UN, 2016, preamble). The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the limits of conventional framings of sustainable tourism

development, including the SDGs. How can tourism researchers and practitioners begin to undo the conventional models and thinking about sustainability? This includes, but is not limited to, linear reductionist models narrowly focused on economic growth, and not taking seriously issues of (in)equity (e.g., Liburd et al., 2020; Sharpley, 2020). Leach, MacGregor, Scoones, & Wilkinson (2021) explain how individuals and communities across the world can alternatively be seen to respond to COVID-19 that:

... create new spaces and opportunities to engage with complexity,  
promotes efforts to make connections and break down silos, and  
allows for different [sustainable development] thinking and action to  
emerge through engagement with actors whose voices are less  
commonly heard (pp. 1-2)

Novy (2021) describes how COVID-19 emptied Amsterdam of visitors and residents described the situation as a “a blessing in disguise” when the otherwise permanent noise, litter and tourists were replaced with a newfound tranquillity. To Amsterdammers, a return to pre-pandemic tourist numbers became a threat, not a promise. Residents and other stakeholders had for years been promised that tourism should become sustainable, without much agreement on what it might look like in practice. Instead, they created series of initiatives better aligned with the city’s vision that: “Visitors are welcome but not at any price.” These include new practices to prevent souvenir shops from displacing local businesses, developers from turning residential spaces into holiday lets, and alternative measures to reduce so-called incivilities (i.e., littering, and public urination) by the ‘no-strings-attached’ visitors.

The Amsterdam example is interesting not by its ability to leverage resilience, but in its ability to undo conventional models and engender resourcefulness through “Shared capacity to behave together for the common good [...] wherein existing knowledge can extend, interrelate, co-exist, and where new ideas and relationships can emerge prosthetically” (Jennings, 2018, p. 249). It enables those involved to reclaim their commons through alternative values and ways of being- and-becoming with others (Liburd, Duedahl & Heape, 2020).



In closing, if the renewed call for greater resilience of tourism in a post-pandemic era remains wedded in conventional models and thinking about sustainability, chances are it may come to serve as a paradigm nudge rather than a transformational paradigm shift (Weaver, 2009). Such undoing would reject incremental adaptations to the dominant paradigm and insist on addressing the root problems that create the need for destinations and civic society to become resilient in the first place.

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