

Special Issue IT.A.CÀ

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Fabio Corbisiero

Embracing Responsible Tourism: Exploring New Frontiers in Sustainable Travelling

In recent years, the global travel industry has undergone a significant transformation, with a growing emphasis on sustainability and responsible tourism practices. As concerns about climate change and environmental degradation continue to escalate, travelers are increasingly seeking out destinations and experiences that minimize their carbon footprint and contribute positively to local communities. This shift towards sustainable tourism represents not only a moral imperative but also a promising avenue for economic growth and cultural exchange. One of the most exciting developments in the realm of sustainable tourism is the emergence of new forms of green travel. Traditional mass tourism, with its focus on high-volume, low-cost travel, often results in overcrowding, environmental damage, and cultural commodification. In contrast, eco-tourism, food-tourism, and community-based tourism offer alternative models that prioritize environmental conservation, cultural authenticity, and community empowerment. A growing list of events and festivals are finding their own ways to answer the call to sustainability action. In our homeland, Bologna, the Festival IT.A.CA' program - the Italian long standing sustainable tourism event - promotes, since 2009, low-impact, sustainable and responsible travel initiatives that engage the community and visitors to both better the environment and enhance visitor-resident sentiment. Pledge programs and visitor education are also trending (Moralli & Musarò, 2021).

This initiative is a "community-based tourism" that takes sustainable travel a step further by directly involving local communities in the tourism value chain. Rather than being passive spectators, travelers are invited to participate in cultural activities, homestays, and volunteer projects that directly benefit host communities. By fostering mutual respect and understanding between hosts and guests, community-based tourism fosters meaningful cultural exchange and promotes socio-economic development at the grassroots level.

In this perspective, sustainable and responsible tourism encompasses a holistic approach to travel that seeks to minimize negative environmental, socio-cultural, and economic impacts while maximizing the positive contributions to destinations and host communities. At its core, responsible tourism emphasizes the principles of sustainability, equity, and stewardship. It recognizes the interconnectedness of ecosystems and human societies, advocating for practices that promote harmony between tourists, residents, and the environment.

A wealth of scientific researchers and eco-innovators underscore the importance of responsible tourism in mitigating the adverse effects of conventional tourism. Studies have documented the ecological footprint of tourism activities, ranging from habitat degradation and biodiversity loss to carbon emissions and waste generation. Likewise, socio-cultural impacts, such as cultural commodification, displacement of indigenous communities, and loss of traditional livelihoods, have been extensively documented.

The last year hiring of a cruise industry's on-staff Chief Scientist thanks to the Hurtigruten Foundation's (a Norwegian public coastal route transporting passengers) commitment to preserving endangered wildlife, battling plastic waste and marine litter, and supporting communities in the areas they operate ensured actions of sustainability and responsibility towards the environment and travellers.

Simultaneously, scientific research also highlights the potential benefits of responsible tourism (Corbisiero, 2022). Sustainable tourism initiatives have been shown to enhance conservation efforts, empower local communities, and foster cultural exchange and understanding. From ecotourism projects that support conservation of fragile ecosystems to community-based tourism initiatives that promote socio-economic development, scientific evidence demonstrates the positive outcomes of responsible tourism practices. In the context of destination management

and governance of the travel industry, the broad capabilities of “Destination Management Organizations” (DMOs) the literature highlights the role of tourists, business owners, employees, government officials, non-governmental institutions, and residents in this regard (Goodwin, 2016). Mihalič (2020) advocates that responsibility enablers are related to socio-psychological tourism supply capacity (e.g., residents’ quality of life), socio-psychological demand capacity (visitors’ experience), and socio-political capacity (e.g., actions, agendas). These aspects, among other factors, aid destinations in monitoring and managing unsustainable tourism risks, such as overtourism, which is related to exceeding the capacity thresholds of destinations and an increase in congestion, resulting in communities’ opposition to tourism and a decrease in visitors’ interest. The theory of DSR stresses that destination sustainability can be attained if stakeholders act with a common goal to benefit society. As a result, this concept captures the outcome of collaboration in socially responsible conduct, which is supported by the responsible tourism approach. Despite the just mentioned growing recognition of responsible tourism, significant challenges persist. Inadequate infrastructure, limited access to resources, and competing interests often hinder the implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives. Moreover, the rise of overtourism in popular destinations exacerbates environmental degradation and socio-cultural tensions, underscoring the need for innovative solutions. However, amidst these challenges lie opportunities for scientific innovation and collaboration. As we look to the future, it is imperative to prioritize research and innovation in responsible tourism. Multidisciplinary approaches, integrating insights from ecology, sociology, economics, and other fields, are essential for understanding the complex dynamics of tourism systems and designing effective solutions. Moreover, fostering partnerships between academia, industry, governments, and civil society is critical for scaling up responsible tourism initiatives and achieving sustainable development goals. Further, responsible tourism represents a paradigm shift in the way we conceptualize and practice tourism (Musarò, 2014). Grounded in scientific evidence and ethical imperatives, responsible tourism offers a path towards a more equitable, resilient, and sustainable future. By harnessing the power of scientific inquiry, innovation, and collaboration, we can advance responsible tourism as a force for positive change, benefiting both present and future generations. In conclusion, the Festival IT.A.CA’ model can help increase tourism responsibility by analysing the implementation chances of agendas and environmental policies. To avoid the expectation that the model leads to the implementation (e.g., responsible tourism) phase itself, this model of both cultural and touristic event must recognize that potential conflicts among the stakeholder groups are an important element in the political process, enabling progression towards the higher phases. In that regard, the roles of governments, industry, NGOs and local communities will also need to be further discussed and researched. The goal of this priceless special issue is to provide the scientific community and tourism professionals with critical analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of the current tourism infrastructure. This is precisely what the writers have attempted to do.

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