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SETTING THE RESEARCH AGENDA: Navigating Shifting Sands- Research in Changing Times

Tourism research conferences come and go, as do many of the ideas generated. In fact, many conferences see the same work repeated rather than built upon. At the 2019 Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA) annual international research conference, attempts have been made to move this forward by running two sessions on setting an agenda for future research. As an organisation with a mixed membership with researchers from commercial, government and academic worlds together along with those who use such research, including DMOs, hotels, tour operators and so on, TTRA is well placed to lead such ongoing development. While many areas were discussed, four research priorities have been established to encourage further focused research and encourage true knowledge dissemination.

Key words: Climate Change; Overtourism; People-Centred; Tourism Jobs; KPIs; Future research

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Introduction

The 2019 Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA) annual international research conference took place in Melbourne Australia, with delegates from all continents and tourism sectors. The overall theme of the conference was *Navigating Shifting Sands: Research in Changing Times*, and over the course of the conference, delegates navigated the terrain of shifting sands – reflecting not only the great Australian deserts and coastline, but where we understand the influence of the external global environment on international tourism trends.

Two special round-table sessions were held at the beginning and end of the conference around *Setting the Research Agenda*. The aim was to take what was discussed at the conference, set some research priorities and move into the future. A number of themes emerged from the session that the attendees felt reflect the current state of the tourism sector at large.

Four over-arching, related themes emerged from the discussions: climate change and overtourism, business employment and supply, measurement and KPIs, and people-centred planning along with First Nations people. The purpose of this discussion paper is to explore these themes further. By so doing, it will help to re-engage the global mind set with regards to how travel impacts upon the planet and the peoples who inhabit it.

During the agenda sessions, one significant point became very clear to many participants. As a research association, TTRA brings researchers from commercial, government and academic worlds together along with those who use such research, including DMOs, hotels, tour operators and so on. Yet, it became clear that, in spite of much talk about collaboration and cooperation, there remains limited cross-pollination of research-based knowledge. This was particularly evident with much of the discussion on climate change and ‘overtourism’, areas that academic researchers have been studying for decades, yet one that has only recently become important to the industry at large.

This paper is the first step of a longer journey and challenge for TTRA to truly bring together our field and share knowledge. How we plan to facilitate this is discussed at the end of the paper.

Themes

The points outlined below are not intended to cover everything that was said at the research agenda sessions, but to distil the elements that gained most traction and general agreement from participants. The engagement of all those involved was extremely high and motivating.

1. *Climate change, overtourism*

In a panel discussion with Keynote Speaker and scientist, Tim Flannery, DMO chief Roger Grant and academic Marion Joppe, it became evident that the biggest issues the tourism industry is facing is climate change and overtourism.

Measuring the carbon outputs from tourism and setting goals for reducing the sector's carbon footprint were seen as urgently required, particularly in response to public perceptions around low carbon impact travel. This led to discussion on the need for alternative solutions for transport options and more locally, how internally organisations measure their impact.

It was acknowledged that there are broader sustainable environmental programs to which tourism can respond, but they need to be better understood. It was noted that there is a Global Destinations Sustainability Index, among numerous others (for example, see <https://www.gds-index.com>).

Navigating the range of indices and programs is another area for researchers to address. However, it is important to move beyond simply measuring and again understanding

what is happening globally and how economic systems can transition toward a sustainable future.

Chasing increasing numbers of visitors has resulted in ‘overtourism’ at many destinations and is not simply an outcome of an economic desire for growth, but raises many questions as to how and what is measured in terms of success. This is an issue for those DMOs who are funded by their members, most of whom are commercial tourism operators and retailers, and demand to see either numbers or economic growth. This needs to be challenged and the DMOs provided with tools that can support their efforts to educate their members and other funding bodies, and aligns with the third theme in this paper.

2. *Business, Employment, Supply*

When discussing both economic and environmental sustainability and making travel and tourism a more sustainable industry, it was acknowledged that one cannot shy away from the need to make employment in travel and tourism more attractive and sustainable. This was the second theme arising from the session.

The UNWTO’s theme for Tourism Day in 2019 was ‘Tourism and Jobs: a better future for all’, raising issues that were also discussed by TTRA. The UNWTO also noted that tourism’s role in job creation is undervalued, while TTRA participants also noted that the jobs themselves are also often undervalued. Jobs in travel and tourism are generally low paid, requiring long and anti-social hours and in some cases, they are only seasonal. If there is the desire to have an industry that is attractive to work in, the poor image travel and tourism as an employer needs to be understood and addressed.

Similar to the issue of carbon emissions, the problem is not just the preserve of travel and tourism employers. Mass travel and the demand for ever increasingly cheaper and more

competitive packages have reduced margins across the industry to levels that are not sustainable. Yet the upper end of the travel and tourism industry is still making considerable profits at the expense of poor salaries and conditions of employment for their staff. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to consider empowering participation in regenerative economies and economic diversification.

There was a general consensus that as a research-focussed association, TTRA can be a voice advocating for much needed improvements in pay and conditions for staff in the travel and tourism industry through the development of research tools and systems. Consistent reporting of research data is another issue that can be considered via presenting state-of-art analyses of the data itself, and relates to the next theme that came out of the discussions, namely the importance of measurement and KPIs for DMOs.

3. *Measurement, KPIs etc Important for DMOs*

As already noted, consistency of measuring and reporting tourism data is crucial for DMOs. The need to talk about tourism in economic diversification and participate in placemaking is crucial, whether it is measuring in numbers (KPIs). Again, it was noted that this should no longer be the primary objective, potentially requiring a new kind of mission statement that incorporates new KPIs to measure success.

As noted in the overtourism discussion, it again became clear that the tourism industry must be brought along with DMOs and others, so that a holistic perspective can be presented along with KPIs which meet all stakeholder/community funders. Furthermore, the mindset of all government levels needs to be changed, from ‘bums on seats’, ‘heads on beds’ towards more sustainable measures. Such major shifts can take time and need to be based on strong research, so it was also noted that simple and creative ideas for business to create sustainable

opportunities is required, and may be consumer driven - if you change the behaviour of people, you change the behaviour of business.

4. *People-centred*

The last point above leads towards the fourth theme, that of people-centred tourism, with a focus not only on the consumer, but also on the host communities, their people and respect for cultures, and how these resources are used. Issues around the overuse of natural resources and not respecting the host cultures seems to have grown, requiring developing knowledge with the host cultures. It is around having a people and culture centred focus in all research.

In relation to First Nations and tourism, a point that was powerfully made at the conference and in the discussions was what should they (First Nations people) give up to tourism outsiders, what to retain control of and how to balance this against colonising influences...is a seat at the table enough? Collaborative research to understand this is crucial as more and more visitors are ‘demanding’ ‘authentic’ First Nations connections and experiences.

Proposed Priorities

While there are many nuanced needs for increased knowledge as discussed above, we have identified priorities under each general theme that we encourage researchers to address as a matter of urgency. One to two priorities per theme have been identified based on the discussion above. As an international group, there were some regional and even local differences, but there was more that united us than divided us.

1. *Climate Change*: Beyond measurement – future transition for climate change and tourism
2. *Business, employment, supply*: Workforce development policies for the future in tourism and travel
3. *Measurement*: Taking a holistic perspective to provide KPIs which meet all stakeholder/community funders. Changing the mindset of local, state and national governments.
4. *People-centred tourism*: Focus on people and respect for cultures, and how we use those resources ourselves. First Nations and tourism – what to give up to tourism outsiders, what to retain control of and how to balance this against colonising influences

Where work has been done in any of these areas, state-of-the-art reviews that summarise the range of current research are urgently required and need to be widely accessible and presented in ‘plain language’.

Conclusion: where to from here?

What is clear from the points outlined above is that the old paradigm has run its course, and the new paradigm that this age demands in order to create a truly sustainable tourism economy is ‘the host comes first’. A research agenda that proceeds philosophically from ‘the host comes first’ would be truly revolutionary and liberating – for both host and guest – constituting a shift in thinking that is profound, long overdue, and might just save us all.

Next Steps

As noted in the Introduction, one point that became clear via the discussion outlined above is that many of the ‘issues’ identified by the industry-based participants such as the

DMOs have been (and continue to be) studied by academic researchers for some time. In fact, some issues have been studied for decades. Consequently, it is clear that greater connections and collaborations need to be made between the various sectors of the research community, a task that TTRA is well positioned to address. As such, we are in the early stages of developing the TTRA Collaborative Research Hub that will provide a platform from which all researchers can share their knowledge in plain English and where collaborations can and will be encouraged and facilitated.

TTRA encourages papers or projects on the listed priorities to be presented at the TTRA International conference in June 2020 and beyond.