Spirituality: A Way to Realize Sustainable Tourism

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Abstract

When deliberating on the spiritual dimension of tourism, one key question is that how individuals are seeking for their life meaning and experiences of divine existence, as well as their connectedness as subjectively lived during their travel.

In fact, tourism is closely connected to religion which has always been a powerful travel motivation from the time of early pilgrimages to contemporary journeys to sacred places. Religious sites, rituals, festivals and ceremonies are considered important attractions for both religious followers with special systems of belief and tourists with a casual interest. Perhaps, this characteristic of the tourism experience is the main reason for spiritual tourism experiences being recently popular among individuals who have started engaging in spirituality-driven experiences and among persons aiming to develop their continuing sublime engagement by means of travel. There are various reasons for travelling for spiritual growth which is opposed to the traditional notions of pilgrimage and religious tourism. However, relatively few scholars have explored the multitudinous relationships between religion, spirituality, and sustainable tourism, despite the pervasiveness of religious tourism and spiritual connections to place. A subject that has received only scant attention in the literature is the negative social and ecological impacts of religious (mass) tourism. Several authors have noted the negative impacts of religious tourism on the commercialization of places and artifacts that were once held as sacred locations. The commodification of religious symbols and the economic implications of selling them should become of increased interest to researchers as the world becomes more consumption-oriented.

Keywords: spirituality, alternative tourism, sustainable tourism

1. Introduction

Religious tourism has existed since antiquity, and the term is commonly referred to as faith tourism, which is a type of tourism, where people travel individually or in groups for pilgrimage, missionary, or leisure purposes (Álvarez-García et al. 2018). As Britton (1991) argued the topic thus has a place in the literature that deals with the creation and representation of tourism spaces, many of which combine secular and spiritual meanings as evidenced in many countries (Mat Som, Masutani and Ahmad, 2016) . In the past, tourism is traditionally closely linked to religion which has acted as a powerful motive for travel from the time of early pilgrimages to contemporary journeys to sacred places. Religious buildings, rituals, festivals and ceremonial events are important tourist attractions for those with a casual interest as well as more devout followers of the particular systems of belief represented (Mat Som, Masutani and Ahmad, 2016). As Rinschede (1992) suggests, it can be argued that religious tourism as a travel which is motivated by religious motives, is among the oldest types of tourism and ''probably as old as religion'' itself (p. 53). Studies of religion and tourism are usually centered on the purpose and impact of tourism activities, destination images, and managing sacred sites (Hattab and Katz, 2001; Jackowski & Smith, 1992; Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Schneider and Sonmez, 1999; Sharpley and Sundaram, 2005; Vukonic, 1992). According to Rinschede (1992), two temporal forms of religious tourism can be defined in terms of short- and long-term. Short-term religious tourism includes excursions to nearby pilgrimage centers and religious conferences, usually taking place within a day, while Long-term religious tourism can take several days—for example, Muslims spending 45 days in Mecca for their Hajj. Nowadays, religious tourism has a broad scope and is affected by population changes and economic development (Jackowski and Smith,1992).

Religion and religiosity are acknowledged factors influencing human behaviour according to various social settings, yet research that explores relationships between religion, behaviour and tourist destination choice remains highly limited (Din, 1989; Rinschede, 1992; Fleischer, 2000; Howe, 2001; Poria et al., 2003; Weidenfeld, 2006; Weidenfeld and Ron, 2008). Din (1989) argues that social scientists have tended to overlook the importance of religion in tourism studies. When it comes to the relationship between tourism and religion, the lack of literature is even more obvious, especially regarding religious attributes and their impact on tourist needs (Mat Som, Masutani and Ahmad, 2016); relatively few scholars have

explored the multitudinous relationships between religion, spirituality, and sustainable tourism.

2. Sustainability in Tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism is inextricably linked to the ethic of sustainable development (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Farrell and McLellan, 1987, cited by: Ramli and Byrd, 2012). It is believed that sustainable tourism includes most of those factors and principles which are emphasized by sustainable development. Mathieson and Wall (1982) who were among the first advocates of adopting a sustainable development approach to tourism, studied on tourism's economic, physical and social impacts due to this fact that tourism development planning is a complex process in which diverse economic, environmental and social structures should be considered). Murphy (1985) by adopting a community approach to tourism planning argues that tourism planning needs to be restructured so that environmental and social factors may be placed alongside economic considerations. Getz (1986) emphasized necessity for considering theoretical models of planning which draw planners' attention to other forms of social, economic and environmental planning rather than focusing on one form in isolation (Ramli and Byrd, 2012).

During the late 1980s, the sustainable development approach to tourism planning was advanced by a number of authors (Inskeep, 1987, 1988; Gunn, 1987, 1988; Pearce, 1989; Romeril, 1989a, b; cited by: Ramli and Byrd, 2012). Most authors are of the opinion that sustainable tourism development refers to a type of tourism development which is associated with ecological and social responsibility and considerations. In other words, sustainable tourism development aims to meet the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing environmental, social and economic values for the future generations. As Page and Dowling (2002) suggest, sustainable tourism development is recognized as a pioneer to management of all resources in such a way that it can fulfil economic, social and aesthetic needs while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems. In Wearing and Neil (1999) view, the concept of sustainability has become a mediating term in bridging the ideological and political differences between the environmental and development lobbies, a bridge between the fundamentally opposed paradigms of eco- and anthropocentrism (Ramli and Byrd, 2012).

According to GLOBE 90 (1990, p. 2), the goals of sustainable tourism are:

- to develop greater awareness and understanding of the significant contributions that tourism can make to the environment and the economy,
- to promote equity in development,
- to improve the quality of life of the host community,
- to provide a high quality of experience for the visitor, and
- to maintain the quality of the environment on which the foregoing objectives depend

Butler (1993) argues that the term sustainable tourism implies the maintenance of tourism itself, whatever its impacts, rather than maintenance of the human or physical context within which the tourism occurs. Therefore, he advocates the term 'sustainable tourism development', which means a kind of tourism developed and maintained in an area (community, environment) in such a way and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period without degrading the quality of both human and physical environment in which it exists, in accordance with successful development and well-being of other activities and processes. In Pigram's (1990) view, sustainable tourism can be seen as a type of tourism which facilitates sustainable development. He argued that some researchers equate sustainable tourism with 'alternative tourism'. From other point of view, Jafari (1989) suggests that through an appropriate management within proper settings, most, if not all, types of tourism can be potentially sustainable in the sustainable development sense.

Jafari argues that this perception is related to the dominance at that time of the so-called 'cautionary' and 'adaptancy' approach platforms, which assumed that mass tourism was unsustainable by nature. On the other hand, Clarke (1997) suggests that the 'knowledge-based' platform, being dominant in the 1990s, de-emphasised the relationship between scale and impact. Based on this argument, small-scale or alternative tourism can negatively or positively affect destination, depending on the case in which it is implemented and the quality of the management. The logic of the extension also derives from the simple observation that tourism as a whole cannot be sustainable unless mass tourism is made sustainable, since that component by definition accounts for and will continue to account for the great majority of all tourism activity (Ramli and Byrd, 2012).

3. Alternative Tourism and Sustainability - Issues

Butler (1996) is of the opinion that a major problem with the concept of sustainable development in tourism is that it takes a very long time to be

sure that any activity is sustainable. In Weaver's (1998) view, it is impossible to estimate the contemporary magnitude of sustainable tourism due to the novelty and unclear definition of this concept, as well as being defined by future outcomes, which cannot be anticipated. Appearing sustainable at the present time, some practices may be evaluated as unsustainable in the future. It is difficult to predict tourism as a fast growing and changing socio-economic phenomenon, for more than a few months or years in advance. However, some researchers (Johnston and Edwards, 1994) believe that sustainability is a confusing concept. As the same way, MacLellan (1997) discuses on definition of sustainable development in the Brundland Report, which, in his opinion, established a wide range of contradictory refinements, applications and policies, that are often impossible to apply in practice or measure effectively.

In the case of spiritual tourism, which can be considered as a type of alternative tourism, even the most benign forms of this type of tourism may negatively affect the environment. Butler (1991) argues, if the main goal is to protect the environment in an intact form, therefore, tourism development cannot be a proper choice, because any type of tourist consumption is associated with impact. However, Wheeller (1992) mentions 'an elitist tourism product'. In Wheeller's view, absolute restriction is not a truly sustainable option because the high cost of exclusiveness resultant from such restriction can result in such an elitist tourism product which has been labelled 'ego-tourism'. Several authors suggest that tension between sustainability principles and the basic fact that growth in ecotourism involves over-tourism in pristine areas, has threatened the legitimacy of ecotourism. As Wheeller (1995) argues, commitment of tour operators, tourists and host communities to principles of sustainability will tend to be conditional on self-interest; therefore, he questions whether there can ever be a coexist relationship between tourism and the environment. Regarding ecotourism as a type of alternative tourism, Honey (1999) argues that while concerns are generally regarded as important; they have taken little of the gloss off the growing alternative tourism movement. He suggests, one way that the continued pursuit of ecotourism has been justified, in light of such concerns, is to argue that ecotourism can serve as a model for other forms of tourism, which is able to facilitate sustainability of tourism as a whole. Adopting Honey's view, it can be argued that alternative tourism, such as religious tourism, is a proper model for other forms of tourism by which, sustainability of tourism can be realized (Ramli and Byrd, 2012).

4. How Spirituality Can Realise Sustainable Tourism?

Often contextually defined, spiritual tourism has been associated with immersive activities associated with faith, religion and belief system. But, there is little evidence to show that people understood the link between spirituality and sustainability. This is what tourism providers must change. In tourism, carrying capacity (TCC) is defined as the "maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time without causing damage to the physical, economic, socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in visitor satisfaction". The focus is on estimating visitor numbers and ensuring a cap on them and commensurate economic gains by enriching product and service quality. As one type of alternative tourism, ecotourism, for example, has provided tourists with greater insights on the impacts of humans onto the environment. It helps foster appreciation of nature via experiences that reach to deeper change (Allen, 1993; cited by Kasim, 2016). As Honey (2008) suggests, an authentic ecotourism experience can lead to greater awareness of the environment It focuses not only on sustainability but also greater understanding about human-nature relationship (Kasim, 2016), thus a spiritual person will have the tendency to make responsible decisions that contribute towards sustainability.Currently, the interaction spurred by over 1 billion tourists crossing international borders annually has the potential to stimulate deep spiritual experiences and transformational spiritual growth. In fact, the cultural exchange and dialogue evoked by spiritual tourism are the very cornerstones of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect, the fundamental building blocks of sustainability (UNWTO, 2013; Banerjee, 2015). If development of spiritual tourism is associated with responsible and sustainable use of both natural and cultural resources, then, a wide variety of opportunities such as employment, income generation, poverty alleviation, rural migration decreasing, rapid product diversification, and nurture a sense of pride among communities and destinations can be provided. Realizing the sustainability requires understanding and respecting local traditions, spiritual values, rich cultural heritage and benefits of host communities in visited destinations. In addition to economic and environmental aspects, social and cultural aspects of tourism – particularly spiritual tourism here – must be considered by decision makers (Banerjee, 2015). Only in this way can we hope to achieve a truly sustainable tourism sector the world over.

When addressing spirituality and sustainable development, it is worth examining at mega spiritual destinations around the globe. Kumbh Mela in India, for instance, is the largest religious gathering in the world which

attracts millions of Hindus every year (Buzinde et al., 2014). Besides being the largest congregation on earth, it was also included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017 by UNESCO. However, the event's spiritual benefits come at an environmental cost, with litter and river pollution high on the list of impacts; local environmental groups have already raised concerns about pollution levels in the river. Likewise, when approximately three million pilgrims descend upon Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, Islam's most holy places during the Hajj pilgrimage, the environmental impact is also cause for concern. The Saudi government undoubtedly faces a colossal challenge in managing this unique form of travel experience, but progress has already been made. The local authorities are constantly expected to provide adequate amenities which require constant assessment to enable pilgrims perform their rituals without the stress of overcrowding (Isolami et al., 2017) because physical factors are argued to be of immense importance to the crowding perception of individuals at any given function.

5. Conclusion

Spiritual tourism has been recognized as one of the major contributors in a country's revenue, and many countries are known for their spiritual heritages. Recently, due to the generic changes in the people's attitude towards spirituality, a phenomenal increase has happened in spiritual travelers. It also can be observed in recent academic studies.

It is worth noting that spiritual and pilgrimage destinations have participated in Green Pilgrimage Network to reduce environmental footprint. Pilgrims and spiritual tourists are being educated about their responsibilities as stewards of the earth and motivate them to do their parts for the environment, which will lead to more spiritually rewarding experience.

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