

Never look back? Revisiting the past

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 June 2023

Received in revised form 12 November 2023

Accepted 12 November 2023

Available online 12 January 2024

Handled by Scott McCabe

Keywords:

Tourism's impacts

Tourism development

Theoretical progress

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the arguments made in an early article in *Annals of Tourism Research* (Butler, 1974) and its potential implications for tourism research today. Two conclusions are drawn, one is that ignoring such early articles can lead to misinterpretations on the origin, timing, and nature of the first critical reviews of tourism, and second, that early discussions of the problems of tourism also provide a useful introduction to the often misunderstood concept of sustainable tourism in terms of the factors involved and their relationships.

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Introduction

The old adage of never looking back might be viewed as appropriate in the context of returning to papers which one wrote half a century ago, as the world has changed greatly since then, particularly so in the case of tourism. However, to return to earlier works and their contemporaries, and to reconsider them in the context in which they were originally presented can be useful in helping understand how a subject like tourism has reached its current state of knowledge and thought. A historical perspective, something often lacking in tourism (Walton, 2005) can also aid in understanding why current tourism scholars may be failing to take advantage of and learning from earlier studies. For this review, this author was invited to return to an article (Butler, 1974) published very early in the life of *Annals of Tourism Research*, entitled "The Social Implications of Tourist Development". It was submitted for consideration to *Annals* at the invitation of the founding editor, Jafar Jafari, an anthropologist specifically interested in the social aspects of tourism who was keen to see papers on this and related topics submitted for consideration to the journal, its original purpose being:

"to encourage the development, dissemination and application of tourism research and concepts. (noting tourism as) ... a socio-economic subject for research and development in order to facilitate an inter-disciplinary approach to the study of tourism" (Jafari, 1974).

The paper was short by current standards, around 3000 words, with only twelve cited references (with another three articles on a similar topic previously published in *Annals* also listed). The main purpose of the article, as noted in its Abstract, was to "examine the impact of tourism developments upon destination areas, with specific reference to the implications for the social environment of these areas" (Butler, 1974: 100) and to argue that more attention needed to be paid to the social (and cultural) impacts of tourism on destinations and their communities, perhaps representing an early "critical" approach to tourism research. The paper concluded that it "had been able to do little more than indicate that the impact of tourism and recreation is much more complex in nature than many writers have indicated" (op cit 109). The text itself is of minimal value or meaning some fifty years on, given the volume

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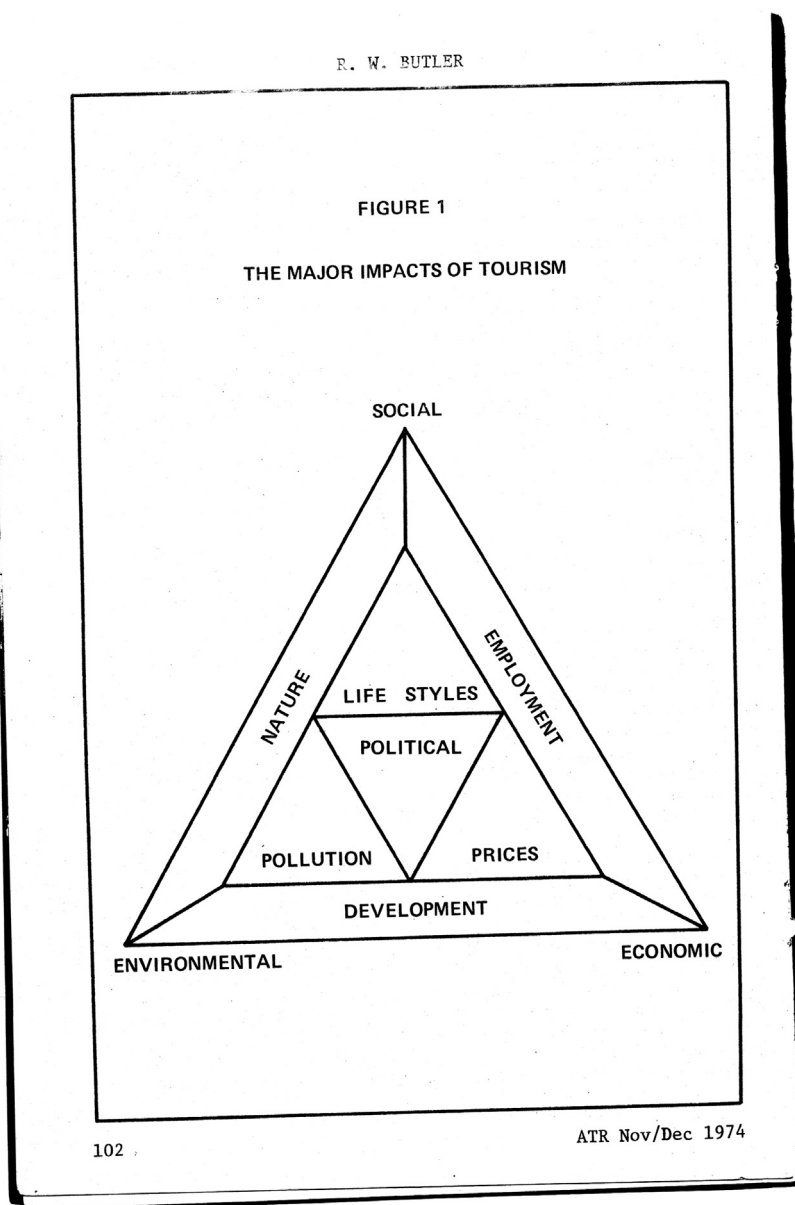


Fig. 1. The Major Impacts of Tourism.

of work since then that has been carried out on aspects of this topic (SCOPUS lists over 60,000 items using “social implications”, “tourism development” and *Annals of Tourism Research* some 1884 references). The paper identified a problem area in terms of inadequate and missing research, and provided a framework in the form of a simple model (Fig. 1) which illustrated some of the elements involved in examining the impacts of tourism and perhaps, more importantly, their links with each other, in a form very similar to that which is often used to illustrate sustainable tourism today. Over its half century of life in published form, the article, has had 75 citations, at least two of which were by the author himself.

Implications

It is only useful to return to old works if they can reveal still relevant and/or new information, and thus the rest of this paper considers some implications which can be drawn from such a review fifty years on. One point is the extremely small number of cited references in the paper, which is a reflection of the literature on the subject under discussion at that time, and contrasts with the excessive rush to publish of recent times (Lee & Benjamin, 2023). Indeed, the point of the paper was to draw attention to a significant and worrying absence of research on an important aspect of tourism and tourism development. It is a good reflection on the paucity of published academic research in tourism in that period that two years later, a paper discussing a case study of tourism as an agent of

change in *Annals* by Greenwood (1976) cited only 7 references and did not include the one being discussed here. The absence of that article (Butler, 1974) in the citations could be because: it was not considered relevant or good enough to be cited, and/or it was not published in an established journal in anthropology or sociology and thus Greenwood (an anthropologist) was not aware of the article. The last point is perhaps more significant because researchers in traditional social science disciplines in the 1970s were often uninformed about the academic tourism literature, as is still sometimes the case even today, as many current reviewers of tourism-focused articles submitted to non-tourism journals by non-tourism researchers (or vice versa) will have discovered.

The wide lack of awareness of tourism research, both within, and particularly outside of, tourism is not surprising. In 1974, the two tourism journals at that time (*Tourist review* and *Annals of Tourism Research*) did not have wide circulation within academia generally or even within tourism specifically and were held by few libraries. That is perhaps hard to appreciate today, with over 300 tourism journals in publication and over 10,000 articles on tourism being published each year (McKercher & Dolnicar, 2022). The overabundance of such literature now is an excuse for current researchers not being able to read everything being written on tourism, an excuse which those of us writing in the 1970s could not readily use. In the 1970s however, wide access to any journal by the average scholar was not automatic and journal content was not then obtainable through a computer search or electronic access via one's institution, as is the case today. Books on tourism were equally limited, both in numbers and in scope, some tending to be focused on describing tourist regions rather than tourism, and almost all were highly descriptive and rarely conceptual in focus. It is perhaps for such reasons that much of the early literature on tourism, including that focusing on the negative impacts of development, has been ignored or missed by current researchers, so that one can find questionable statements such as.

“Responsible tourism gained prominence when Jost Krippendorf presented his analysis in *The Holidaymakers* (Krippendorf, 1999) arguing the need to address the negative impacts of tourism. It was with this work and the efforts of a number of NGOs that vocal criticism of tourism as an industry began to be expressed (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021: 563).

Calls for tourism to be more 'responsible', specifically in respect to the impacts on destination communities and their environments were being made well before 1987 and thus long before the need for 'critical' research in tourism studies (Tribe, 2008) was made. The seminal work on the impacts of tourism (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) clearly demonstrated the need for tourism proponents to be more aware and responsive to the impacts of tourism development of all types. Clawson (1959) in *The Crisis in Outdoor Recreation*, and Darling and Eichorn (1967) in their review *Man and nature in the national Parks* had drawn academic and public awareness to the potential threat to natural areas from increasing visitor numbers, while Wall and Wright (1977) concisely documented the nature of environmental and other problems caused by tourism and recreation. The *Annals'* paper (Butler, 1974) was followed closely by one of the most cited early papers dealing with the social impacts of tourism (Doxey, 1975). *Tourism Blessing or Blight?* (Young, 1973) was one of the first expressions of concern over the social impacts of modern tourism in the non-academic press and was followed by Turner and Ash with their equally critical review of tourism, *The Golden Hordes* (1975). In the same period Bryden's (1973) study on the effects of tourism development in the Caribbean appeared, noting problems (including social impacts) related to tourism developments and highlighting concerns about the need to consider more than just the economic benefits of tourism development that were usually cited.

Expressions of concern over the presence of tourists in host communities had been expressed much earlier than suggested by Higgins-Desbiolles (2021), for example in opposition to, and dislike of, participants in Thomas Cook's tours in the late 19th century (Butler & Russell, 2010), while an even earlier example would be the case of John Ruskin's complaints about ignorant and unappreciative tourists in Venice even earlier (Ruskin, 1980). The point of this commentary on the early papers on the impacts of tourism is to show clearly that criticism of, and opposition to, aspects of tourism development, both in the academic realm and in general, began much earlier than many authors, particularly those of the 'critical school' might appreciate. Mathieson and Wall (1982: p 42) summed up the situation over four decades ago;

“Tourism, however, has not escaped criticism. Indeed, the challenge to the industry is a mounting one, growing continually in volume and insistence.... Accompanying the widespread economic benefits, there are a variety of unquantified physical and social costs... These criticisms have made little impact upon governments and planners.”

Mathieson and Wall's last comment is unfortunately still valid and therein lies the rub as far as academic work on tourism is concerned. Despite decades of academic criticism of tourism, often accompanied by ample and reliable data, the impact of much academic work has failed to produce the changes in outlook and approach to development and continued expansion of tourism that many who study tourism would like to see. One result is overtourism (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Milano et al., 2019), most often expressed in terms of complaints about the effects of tourism on the social and cultural life of destinations by residents who experience and are concerned about the impacts of large numbers of tourists and their behaviour. Other negative impacts have received less publicity and hence attention, particularly those experienced in the physical environment, which is curious given the longstanding focus on “sustainable tourism”. The general absence of research on environmental impacts perhaps reflects the fact that few tourism researchers have sufficient training (or interest?) in physical sciences. There has been much excellent research in this area carried out for decades by researchers in organisations such as the US Forest Service but published mostly in the recreation and environmental literature. In a tourism context, Meinecke (1929) contributed one of the first papers dealing specifically with the environmental impacts of tourism with his paper on 'The Effect of Excessive Tourist Travel on California Redwood Parks'.

When Higgins-Desbiolles (2021: 552) notes, “The benefits and impacts of tourism have been deeply disputed at least since the advent of modern, mass tourism (e.g. Butcher, 2003; Wheeler, 1991)” there is again the implication that such concerns are relatively recent (over the last two decades), rather than acknowledging that they have been discussed and studied over the last half century. She goes on to correctly argue (op cit 559) that “This debate is also significant in implications for the status of tourism studies. Since

tourism began to be more frequently situated in business schools rather than social science departments, this pressure to be relevant to industry has increased". Part of the problem with academic publishing in tourism is that much of it is preaching to the converted with little or no effect on those unconverted disbelievers. Academic research and writing does not automatically have to be "useful" except in that it contributes to knowledge, but researchers in tourism cannot entirely ignore the fact that they are studying a subject that is of great importance to the lives of many millions of people who are tourists, and has great significance in terms of economic (and also political, environmental and social) concerns for even more people who are residents of the areas in which tourism takes place, including the places visited on route to and from holiday destinations. That is perhaps why the oxymoronic phrase "sustainable tourism" has received so much attention, despite not having had any great effect on resolving the negative aspects of tourism in general (Butler, 1999; Dodds & Butler, 2010; Wheeller, 1991).

One of the many problems of sustainable tourism is that it has never been made clear whether it means making tourism sustainable (which, given tourism has survived COVID restrictions and has regrown, it clearly is) or making tourism fit the general understandings of sustainable development, i.e. living with limits, (Butler, 1999). Another problem relates to the idea that sustainable development gives equal importance to its three "legs" (economic, social and environmental), and as McKercher and Prideaux (2014) p. 23) noted

"anyone who works in the field knows that the concept is impractical. First, you may be able to measure economic impacts to an imperfect degree but, second how do you measure/evaluate environmental changes? The same reasoning would apply to socio-cultural changes... to imply that this balance is based on some credible form of appraisal is nonsense. Where are the examples?"

The equal priority argument is essentially fallacious, economics almost always takes priority over other considerations where development is concerned, and more significantly, there is a fourth and much more important leg of sustainable, or any other form of development, namely, the political aspect (Butler, 2013: 224). Without political support, development generally will not take place, which was why 'political' was placed in the centre of the figure (Fig. 1) in the original 1974 article. That figure can be viewed as a precursor of the 'triangle' of sustainable tourism, in showing not only the three key elements (social, environmental, and economic) as the apices of the figure, but by placing 'political' in the centre, ensured that factor was linked to all three apices through the other elements shown in that fig. A basic argument of the 1974 paper essentially was for an integrated and coordinated study of those complex interactions in tourism development, paying particular attention to the neglected social apex of the figure. The figure, although it received little attention at the time, is a precursor to the "prism" of sustainability (Spangenberg, 2002) which includes the element "institutional", comparable to the "political" core element of the 1974 figure.

Conclusions

The 1974 paper, like many of the far more recognised early papers in tourism research (e.g. Butler, 1980; Cohen, 1972; Plog, 1973) would almost certainly not have been published in their original form in a leading tourism journal today. The limited bibliographies, the absence of empirical data and sophisticated statistical analysis, and the fact that many of the central arguments were based on personal observation and experience would surely have driven modern reviewers to apoplexy. "They are very much products of their time, a period when few models existed in the tourism literature, but they have become obligatory starting points for many subsequent research studies." (Butler, 2015: 23).

Subsequent review and further study in these areas has shown many early papers may have been overly simplistic, even misleading, but they illustrate the origins of what is much of current thinking on tourism and reflect the considerable history of tourism research. Not returning to them can result in misinterpretation of concepts and arguments, as noted by Wang et al. (2016), as well as perpetuation of such mistakes.

"One thing that characterizes these studies is that they dealt with the real rather than the conceptual world of tourism, in particular the nature of tourists and relations with those living in tourist destinations, and the effects tourism development on destinations. This is perhaps why they still have relevance today" (Butler, 2015: 23) and why looking back can sometimes be both pertinent and useful.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Richard Butler: Conceptualization, Writing, reviewing and editing.

Declaration of competing interest

There are no competing or conflicting interests.

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