The challenge of tourism development

The tourism industry in Hong Kong, as well as elsewhere, is confronted with serious and difficult choices about its future. It is because decisions made now will for decades affect the lifestyles and economic opportunities of the residents of destinations and will also help perpetuate or otherwise their continuous attractiveness regardless of whether tourism is flourishing or not. Many of these decisions related to the environment and tangible resources can be irreversible especially if they have negative consequences. Once a community has lost the character that makes it distinctive and attractive to non-residents, it will lose its ability to vie for tourist-based income in an increasingly global and competitive marketplace. Understanding this situation, organisations including the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) have warned that both tourists and residents of tourist destinations could be worse off if the qualitative aspects of tourism development related to the sustainability of the environment are ignored.

Increasingly, tourism is seen as directly related to the natural environment in which it operates. Indeed, tourism is undergoing fundamental changes, linking visitor experience and satisfaction with the environmental settings from which they are derived. The emerging view is that tourism can no longer be viewed as a commercial activity that has no significant impact on the natural, human-made and socio-cultural environments. Instead, tourism should be regarded as totally dependent on an attractive environment. Signs of these changes are everywhere, from government policies on tourism, tourism industry statements on the value of the environment, to the demand for alternative tourism, “green” tourism and in particular “ecotourism”.

The linkage between the environment and tourism can be substantial. In a place where tourism flourishes and the environmental quality is ignored, it can result in negative
The advent of sustainable tourism

Accepting the fact that there is a linkage between tourism, the environment and sustainability, the WTO has been rallying forces to support sustainable tourism development. Earlier, in the 1990s, "sustainable tourism" became a buzzword and is currently endorsed by governments, the tourist industry and non-governmental organisations as a guiding principle in tourism planning and development.

The origin of sustainable tourism can be traced back to the 1987 Brundtland Report (aka Our Common Future), published by the World Commission on Environment and Development, although sustainable tourism was not explicitly mentioned in it. The concept of sustainable tourism came out as a result of debate surrounding issues on sustainable development. As the debate became a global issue after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, it gradually infiltrated the policy framework of many governments, organisations and agencies. Now, governments and agencies are seeking alternative frameworks for maximising the protection for and utilisation of tangible and intangible resources for tourism development. Sustainable tourism, if accepted and implemented, should be along the premise that:

- Tourism is first and foremost an economic activity which is desirable to most economies.
- The physical and cultural environments of a destination have intrinsic values that outweigh their values as tourism assets.
- Tourism should be developed in such a way that the original character of the destination is maintained and respected.
- Tourism development should be sensitive to the needs and aspirations of the local community.
- The question of equity (both intragenerational and intergenerational) should be addressed.
Adopting sustainable tourism

As we become more aware of our impact on the Earth, we increasingly look for examples of sustainable economic and community development rather than unconstrained growth. The concept of sustainable growth will help communities use natural resources more prudently and sensitively than in the past and ensure their continued survival for deriving maximum benefits. While "sustainability" has often been associated with such terms as "sustainable development", "sustainable management", "sustainable agriculture" and "sustainable forestry", implementing sustainable tourism poses unique challenges. In the tourism context, it is frequently associated with discussions of "green tourism", "ecotourism" and "nature-based tourism", but these are simply part of a large picture of a growing global tourism industry becoming more relevant in the local context.

Although sustainability has become an attractive ideal for both scientists and activists, operational details, objectives or action plans provided by advocates are scarce particularly when it comes to sustainable tourism. Frameworks articulated by various scholars and advanced in this article can help planners, decision-makers, proponents and stakeholders to initiate sustainable tourism programmes. Judging from the Brundtland Report, sustainability was originally a biophysical concept, which is now being applied in a social and policy context in order to debate what is to be sustained and for whom. For example, by sustainability (in tourism development), do we mean sustaining hotel room occupancy rates or the ecological patterns and processes that maintain naturally occurring ecosystems? Or are we simply concerned with the ongoing social, political and cultural processes that give communities character and individuals security? Sustainability goes beyond economic considerations and biophysical issues and when properly understood and articulated, it deals with important concepts of social order.

Adopting sustainable tourism allows an attraction, a community or a region to play host to visitors without impairing the local culture and environment and ensures that it will be able to attract more visitors to return.

Traditionally, tourism development has depended on initiatives taken by the private sector. In Hong Kong, however, from the onset, the private sector and the authorities have been closely involved in tourism and over the years have accumulated valuable experiences in both planning and development. With the advent of sustainable tourism and the increasingly growing need for incorporating environmental concerns in policy-making affecting tourism development, the authorities, the private sector and the tourists will have to be involved continuously.
This process can proceed in earnest if it is to be based on a framework that embraces the concept of the 4Cs postulated by scholars in the 1990s at the pinnacle of discussion on sustainable development and sustainable tourism development. The framework can be modified and implemented depending on the circumstances that prevail in a particular tourist destination. The 4Cs will reflect the extent to which a government can (1) attempt to **compromise** (by striking a balance between tourism development and environmental conservation); (2) show **commitment** (by recognising that sustainable development and sustainable tourism development require more action and less rhetoric); (3) effect **control** (by establishing a framework or plan for effective regulation of the scale and pattern of development); and (4) enhance **cooperation** (by recognising the need for partnership among local stakeholders).

In addition, many countries and agencies have come up with the local versions of Agenda 21, a global consensus and political commitment made at the Earth Summit in 1992 by more than 170 governments on development and environment cooperation. The importance and the roles of local authorities are now recognised, which could be due to the complexity of the tourism sector, where it is the consumer who is brought to the product and not the other way round; and the increasing awareness that tourists select and respond to destinations, not just individual products, as the visitor experience is made up of a complex range of elements including expectations, transport, information, accommodation, attractions, activities, local infrastructure, natural environment, cultural heritage, a welcoming host population, security, safety and other services.

Contrary to what most of its proponents allude to, sustainable tourism is not about “greening” the tourist industry or ensuring the financial viability of tourist firms alone. As succinctly put by the WTO, to plan and implement sustainable tourism, it requires the following:

- The natural, historical, cultural and other resources for tourism should be conserved for continuous use in the future, while still bringing benefits to the present. This implies that institutions, frameworks and policies should be put in place for the conservation and management of relevant resources.
- Tourism development should be planned and managed in such a way that it does not generate serious environmental or socio-cultural problems in the tourism area. Such problems and concerns might not arise if tourism is strategically planned and alternative resources are given due consideration.
The overall quality of tourism areas is maintained and improved where appropriate. Institutions, policies and frameworks can be responsible for achieving this.

A high level of tourist satisfaction is maintained so that tourist destinations will retain their marketability and popularity.

Conclusion

Following from this and in line with local characteristics, the criteria for developing sustainable tourism in Hong Kong can be formulated as follows:

- As the number of tourists is growing and their expectations are increasingly diverse, there is a need to find out whether the attractions and accommodation are adequate and whether they can meet the needs of visitors.
- As Hong Kong’s destination image is centred around shopping, dining, sightseeing and the promotional catchphrase of “Asia’s World City”, it is necessary to ensure that a combination of cultural, historical and natural sites of attraction can form the basis for an entertaining, educational and varied visitor experience.
- As the territory is set for integration with the Pearl River Delta and opportunities of cross-border cooperation become operational under CEPA, the scale and scope of cooperation become wider, which can be beneficial to sustainable tourism development.
- A unique sense of locality characterised by traditions needs to be promoted. This should be appreciated by the residents, businesses and public officials.

From the foregoing, sustainable development and sustainable tourism development embody the interdependency of environmental, social and economic issues, often referred to as the triple bottom line. For sustainable tourism development to be successful, this interdependency should be taken into consideration. Lastly, given that tourism development has an important role to play in environmental protection and in economic and social development, sustainable tourism development should be promoted and adopted along the line of arguments put forward in this discourse. The stage is therefore set for more discussion, more research and a quest for implementation.

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