

# Guest editorial

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## Sustainable tourism in urban destinations

The growing importance of urban centres has been a defining trend of the past century, with the majority of the world's population now living in cities ([UN\\_DESA, 2018](#)). As urbanization increases, cities are becoming larger and more complex. Today, more than 30 megacities have over 10 million inhabitants ([U.N., 2018](#)). While urbanization has generated benefits, many challenges remain and cities are at the forefront of efforts to support sustainability and address humanity's grand challenges ([Coca-Stefaniak and Morrison, 2022](#)). The UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) are 17 goals designed to meet these challenges and cities play a pivotal role in addressing these sustainability issues. The unique challenge of urban life is the focus of one of these goals, SDG 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable". As is the case with many sustainability issues, SDG11 intersects with other sustainability goals. Social issues, including embracing diversity, equality and inclusion (SDG 5 – Gender equality and SDG 10 reduced inequalities) and the role of tourism in promoting these goals have become more prominent. Work conditions (SDG 9 decent work and economic growth) in tourism and hospitality have become a critical conversation in many countries. The "great resignation" highlights dissatisfaction with employment in the sector. Cities also face various environmental issues (SDG6 clean water and sanitation, SDG 7 affordable and clean energy and SDG), including the protection of natural habitats and biodiversity loss (SDG 14 and SDG15).

Of course, all these sustainability issues take place in the context of preparing for the impacts of climate change (SDG 13). Cities must not only mitigate their contributions to greenhouse gases but also prepare for the effects of changing weather and longer-term climate trends. The \$14 billion investment in the New Orleans levee system that protected the city from Hurricane Ida in 2021 provides an example of the scale of the adaptation required by cities in the years to come. Tourism needs these investments to be sustainable in the future.

As cities have grown, so their popularity as travel destinations has increased ([Morrison and Coca-Stefaniak, 2021](#)). As the COVID-19 pandemic wanes, we face pressing sustainability issues in our cities, each of which intersects with tourism. The World Travel and Tourism Council ([WTTC, 2018](#)) estimates the top 300 cities account for 45% of all arrivals. While tourism can contribute positively to the challenges we face, it is critical not to assume that it will. There are many examples of negative social, environmental and even economic impacts of tourism on urban areas. Only tourism that embraces the principles of sustainable development can achieve the socio-environmental outcomes that contribute to global sustainability. Against this backdrop, the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* is committed to highlighting research on sustainability issues in urban tourism.

Recognising that cities and tourism are both complex adaptive systems is helpful in understanding their deeply interrelated relationships ([Day, 2020](#)). While tourism has long been recognized as a system ([Leiper, 1990](#); [Morrison et al., 2018](#); [Farrell and Twining-Ward, 2004](#)), rarely are the implications of the nature of this system explored. Complex adaptive systems are characterized by the interaction of a large range of independent actors, each working independently. Systems thinking requires changes in the mental models associated with problems ([Senge, 1990](#)), like sustainable tourism. Mainstream thinking among key

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decision-makers in the management and governance of destinations will need to evolve from “command and control” models common within businesses to techniques that influence networks. In most destinations, organizations seeking to influence the adoption of sustainable tourism have little direct power to enforce change and models of shared leadership, collaboration and cooperation are more salient.

Another important insight from systems approaches is recognizing that tourism in cities is an embedded system in the larger urban systems. Many of the policies that enable the sustainable development of tourism rely on people who do not consider themselves part of the tourism system. For example, decisions on infrastructure or public services are typically not made by people who identify as part of tourism. Yet, hoteliers cannot have recycling programmes if waste management does not provide the service; tourism organizations cannot choose renewable energy if the utility has not transitioned to renewables. Tourism’s ability to influence these external stakeholders to consider the specific needs of tourism is critical for tourism’s sustainability. Carlo Alberini’s article in this Special Issue provides important insights into how a destination works to ensure urban planning and port development contribute to sustainable tourism development.

The importance of engaging stakeholders in tourism is one of the defining elements of sustainable tourism and yet, few destinations systematically incorporate the views of residents or other key stakeholders in their tourism planning. As a result, issues remain unresolved until they reach a tipping point where major change is required. Over-tourism is an example of just such an issue, which has been explored in earlier special issues of this journal (Moreno-Gil and [Coca-Stefaniak, 2020](#)). Ongoing, long-term concerns over the increasing number of travellers visiting cities came to a head in 2019: over-tourism became a rallying cry for the anti-tourism sentiment. The issue also highlights the challenge of tourism systems to respond to issues. Despite growing evidence of problems associated with too many tourists in some urban destinations, including Venice and Barcelona, actors in the system were either slow or unable to respond to the issue. Effective, sustainable tourism programmes require comprehensive and professional data collection processes and timely responses to the information stakeholders provide. In this issue, Harold Goodwin explores the challenges of over-tourism and governance. Even when acute issues are not present, monitoring the perceived changes in destination communities is important. Thanapa Wanitchakorn and Kaetwa Muangasame explore residents’ perceptions of transformational tourism development in the heritage city of Chiang Mai (Thailand) and explore the implications of these changes on the community.

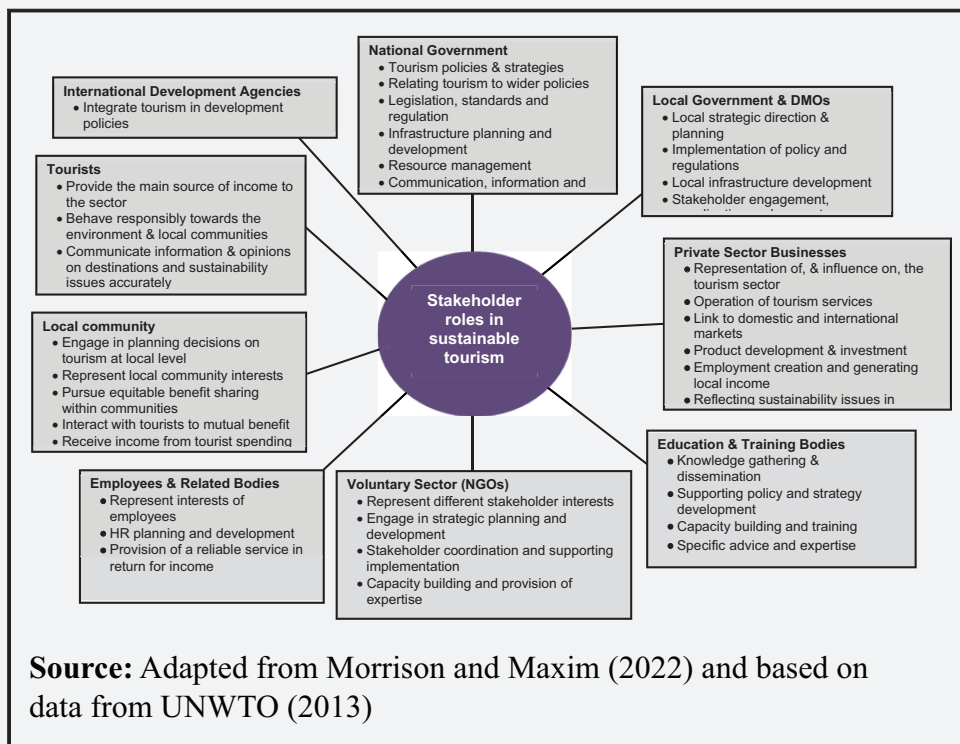
Of course, stakeholder engagement is more than merely monitoring sentiment. There is growing interest in understanding how stakeholders can be engaged in the planning process for tourism development. Several authors in this Special Issue address the importance of enhancing the active participation of stakeholders in the tourism planning and development process. Authors address issues associated with stakeholder engagement and its contribution to sustainable development through tourism. Tek Dangi and James Petrick address the means of enhancing responsiveness, representation and inclusion in tourism governance and Loretta Bellato and Joseph Cheer examine the use of regenerative principles as drivers for stakeholder engagement in Melbourne (Australia). Gaurav Panse, Alan Fyall and Sergio Alvarez examine the role of stakeholder views of sustainability on destination competitiveness.

Sustainable development through tourism, like other social challenges, can be approached from a number of levels of analysis. These involve behaviour changes by individuals (micro-level), including the actions of travellers and the behaviour of people engaged in tourism operations, the adoption of new practices by businesses (meso-level) and the changes at a destination level (macro-level). Through this lens, the role of enterprises and individuals in system change can be extremely important. From an enterprise perspective, while traditional for-profit tourism businesses adopt corporate social responsibility and environmentally

sustainable activities that contribute to tourism system sustainability, it is the emergence of tourism-based social enterprises and similar forms of non-traditional mission-oriented businesses that offer exciting new approaches to enterprise-level sustainability. Social entrepreneurs and the social enterprises they create, create self-sustaining businesses to solve social and environmental problems. These purpose-driven organizations directly contribute to destination sustainability. In this issue, Attambayintavida Vinodan and Sethumadhavan Meera examine social enterprises in the Indian city of Chennai and their ability to contribute to SDGs. Community-based tourism and ecotourism developments can be important contributors to the overall sustainability of tourism systems, as Ni Putu Bayu Widhi Antari and Daniel Connell describe in their examination of the Tukad Bindu development in Bali (Indonesia). The importance of individual behaviours in tourism systems cannot be overlooked. Rocio Martinez Suarez, Jose Alberto Castenada Garcia and Miguel Angel Rodriguez Molina recognize the role of individual behaviour and identify specific market segments that are more likely to contribute to reducing over-tourism and achieving sustainable tourism outcomes.

If tourism is a complex phenomenon, then the operationalization of sustainable tourism is no less complicated, particularly given that it does not involve a single activity but many activities, each contributing sustainable outcomes. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) identifies 42 actions that destinations must undertake to achieve sustainable tourism (GSTC, 2019). Sustainable tourism requires efforts from a wide range of actors (Morrison and Maxim, 2022), from government entities to independent businesses, to be undertaking a range of activities, as shown in Figure 1. An analysis of the GSTC criteria identifies the need for a set of policies, with plans to achieve the policies and programmes that support them. Achieving the criteria requires collaboration, cooperation or at least alignment between entities to achieve the sustainability goals and the actions must be measured and managed for performance improvement (Day and Romanchek, 2020). For example, the GSTC criteria include over 100 indicators to be monitored at a destination level (GSTC, 2013). While there

**Figure 1** The roles of multiple actors in sustainable urban tourism development



are certainly a growing number of destinations that are tackling comprehensive sustainable tourism programmes, they remain in the minority. Consequently, several researchers have expressed frustration at adoption levels of sustainable tourism (Hall, 2011; Ruhanen *et al.*, 2019).

Nevertheless, if sustainable tourism involves a set of activities, then it may be more productive to examine the adoption of specific ones. Some elements of sustainable tourism have been widely adopted across the system for multiple levels of analysis. For example, energy conservation initiatives are often adopted at the destination level through policies or programmes encouraged by the local government or the utility, at the business level with hoteliers embracing energy conservation actions like modern heating, ventilation, and air conditioning or improved insulation and individuals turning off lights, reusing bed linen and having bath towels washed less regularly during their hotel stay. This perspective acknowledges that the adoption of sustainable tourism is actually participating in a large number of specific actions and for the system to be sustainable, action must take place at the individual, business and destination levels. From the perspective of the successful diffusion of policies and programmes through the system, some have become mainstream while others are still in the “early adoption” phase. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the influence of sustainability in the tourism system. Rather than comprehensive programmes, with the tourism organizations of the destination working in unison towards mutual goals, sustainable tourism initiatives tend to focus on specific activities, like energy conservation or reducing single-use plastics and so tend to be somewhat piecemeal. Given the number of activities and the participation of many independent actors, each addressing their own sustainability priorities, sustainable tourism can be seen as a tapestry of projects each contributing to sustainability. In his viewpoint article, David Newsome highlights the importance of city garden projects as a starting point for sustainability in cities.

The implementation of sustainable tourism practices is a wicked problem (Day, 2020) characterized by its complexity and uniqueness. While urban destinations face many common sustainability challenges, each city will respond in its own unique way. While there may be some universal best practices, each city is faced with the challenge of addressing the priorities of its own stakeholders and decision-makers. Given the differences in cities, from New York to Beijing, Jakarta to Lima, each response must be tailored to unique local circumstances. As all urban destinations grapple with the challenges of improving sustainability-related performance, the lessons from this Special Issue will provide important insights that can be adapted to specific circumstances.

### ***A new agenda for sustainable tourism in urban destination management***

Given the complex nature of tourism and cities and the complicated nature of sustainable tourism, it is not surprising that the implementation of sustainable tourism practices faces challenges.

The challenge of sustainable tourism in urban destinations requires renewed focus. Despite the emphasis on sustainable tourism over the past 40 years, there remains much work to be done to ensure that urban tourism contributes to sustainable development.

Building on this Special Issue of the *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, we see great opportunities for future research in sustainable urban tourism and sustainable tourism cities. As we move towards 2030, mindful of the SDGs, areas for future research in this context will include:

- Interdisciplinary studies merge tourism with town planning, place management, urban development, political science and policy-making in an urban context.
- Systems approach sustainable tourism adoption to supplement the current focus on specific issues within sustainability.

- Research to identify the interventions with the greatest ability to create positive change in the urban destination system, including urban transitions research (Ernstson *et al.*, 2010) applied to tourism.
- Research to address barriers to the diffusion of sustainable tourism-related technology, practice and policy at all levels of the system, including new paradigms for smart tourism cities (Coca-Stefaniak, 2020) beyond their current techno-centric focus.
- Greater understanding of effective approaches to collaboration, cooperation and alignment among actors in complex adaptive systems including urban destinations, particularly within the context of building resilient solutions to climate change challenges.

No matter the direction the research in sustainable tourism in urban destinations takes, the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* is committed to disseminating it broadly to researchers, policy-makers and industry practitioners.

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