Book review

Accessible Tourism. Concepts and Issues

Best Practice in Accessible Tourism. Inclusion, Disability, Ageing Population and Tourism

Since the growth of demand for leisure and tourism in the nineteenth and twentieth century there have been broad changes in access to leisure and tourism. The late nineteenth century saw an increased access provided by improvements in overall real income growth, of paid holidays for workers, and the provision of cheaper and easier travel to seaside resorts. Key institutional changes in the supply of holidays meant another stimulus for the increasing accessibility of tourism, of which the development of holiday camps in the 1930s and the introduction of overseas package holidays since the 1950s have been most significant (Shaw and Williams, 1994).

Although the general access to leisure and tourism has increased dramatically for large sectors of society, there are structural features and individual circumstances that cause differences in access (Shaw and Williams, 1994). Such factors are, for example stage in the family life cycle, gender, cultural conditions, amount of leisure time available, access to tourist areas, disposable income, and socioeconomic influences (social class) (Shaw and Williams, 1994), which were boiled down

by Crawford and Godbey (1987) into three types of barriers: intrapersonal barriers, interpersonal barriers and structural barriers. Shaw and Williams (1994) and Goodale and Witt (1989) argue that inequalities in access to certain types of leisure activities has stepwise developed into a new area of leisure constraints research.

It is only recently that leisure constraint research was recognised by tourism scholars to study the accessibility to tourism. The leisure constraints approach is supposed to contribute to the understanding of tourist motivation, decision-making processes and destination choice models (Darcy, 2010). Accessible tourism is defined in different ways, yet the European Commission states that is it is about making it easy for all people to enjoy tourism experiences.

Currently it is estimated that 15 per cent of the world population has a physical, mental or sensory disability (WHO, 2011), and it is estimated that one third of the world population is affected by disabilities in a direct and indirect way (ECEI, 2015). Because of the demographic ageing in the western world the number of people with mental and physical disabilities and with chronically diseases (such as hearing impairments) is expected to increase (Lee *et al.*, 2012; Hoeymans *et al.*, 2014; UNWTO, 2013). This has two implications. First, tourists with disabilities are becoming an important part of the tourism market. Second, the demand for an accessible tourism environment, transport and services will increase. The combination of both presents a challenge to the global travel industry (UNWTO, 2013).

In response, accessible tourism has received growing academic attention and has grown into a separate research area in tourism (Silvia, 2013). According to Darcy (2010) Smith (1987) provided the first examination of barriers to leisure

travel for people with disabilities. Since the late 1990s the number of studies about tourism accessibility for people with disabilities started to increase. Many of these studies, but not all, did apply the leisure constraints framework (Darcy, 2010). Not only scholars, but also the industry has embraced accessible tourism as an important issue. In 2009 the World Tourism Organization presented a "Declaration on the facilitation of tourist travel", facilitating tourism travel for persons with disabilities, and regarding it as an essential part of responsible and sustainable tourism development (UNWTO, 2009, 2013).

Recently Dimitri Buhalis *et al.* published two volumes that can be positioned as milestones in this emerging research area. The first one *Accessible Tourism. Concepts and Issues* (2011) establishes a framework for the study of accessible tourism, and the second *Best Practice in Accessible Tourism. Inclusion, Disability, Ageing Population and Tourism* (2012) gives an insight in the way accessibility of tourism is dealt with in practice. The authors argue that, because of the significant implications for demand and supply, inclusion, disability, ageing population and tourism are increasingly important areas of study. They contend that most studies in the field have focused on the experience of people with disabilities, whereas there has hardly been any discussion defining the concept of accessible tourism. With this two-volume work Dimitri Buhalis, Simon Darcy and Ivor Ambrose aim to encourage and stimulate dialogue in this field by discussing current theoretical approaches, foundations and issues.

Both volumes are written from the perspective of universal design and access for all. In the first volume the authors provide a definition of accessible tourism that connects the principles of universal design with the values of independence, equity and dignity and embeds those values and principles in a framework provided by the tourism system and its stakeholders. They do not limit the issue of accessible tourism to people with disabilities but define it as "a form of tourism that involves

collaborative processes between stakeholders that enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments. This definition adopts a whole of life approach where people through their lifespan benefit from accessible tourism provision. These include people with permanent and temporary disabilities, seniors, obese, families with your children and those working in safer and more socially sustainably designed environments" (pp.10-11). As Buhalis, Darcy and Ambrose regard accessible tourism as a multidisciplinary field of study they approach it holistically in a theoretic and applied volume that build upon another.

The theoretical first volume (by Buhalis and Darcy, 2011) takes a social constructionist approach. The authors belief that disability is a social construct as it response varies across cultures and time periods. The book contains 19 chapters, written by 25 authors, which are divided over three parts. The first part provides the theoretical foundations of accessible tourism. Contemporary models, discourses, conceptualisations and dimensions of the core concepts of disability and accessibility are reviewed, and the different kinds of barriers to tourism for people with disabilities are described. The second part of the book discusses various theoretical lenses through which the experiences of tourists with disabilities can be understood: critical theory and critical disabilities studies; Ricoeur's concept of life and narrative; feminist perspective; Goffmanian approach; Darcy's social model of disability; and an industrial lens, experience lens, and planning lens. The third part discusses the economic value of accessible tourism business. The book ends with a model of accessible tourism, which is built upon four interdependent concepts: dimensions of disability, levels of support needs, access enablers, and universal design. The authors want to stimulate further discourse and research by providing a

cyclic universal approach to accessible tourism.

The applied second volume (by Buhalis Darcy and Ambrose, 2012) aims to increase awareness of and to provide a tool base for universal design and access for all principles to a wider audience in teaching and learning, policy making or industry practice. The volume shows how these principles can be implemented in a practical way by reflecting current practices across a range of destinations and business settings such as travel, transport, accommodation, leisure and tourism services. 24 chapters written by 33 authors provide a series of international case studies that demonstrate best practices by the tourism business, governments, national tourist offices, and third sector advocacy bodies. The authors show how small changes and adaptations can make a big difference in improving the quality of service offering, leading to greater customer satisfaction, loyalty and expansion of business. Thus, it provides insight in the demand for, the supply of, and the coordination and regulation of accessible tourism. Examples are taken from all over the world: Europe, Greece, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Sweden, UK, Austria, Norway, Spain, Britain. The book covers a wide range of subject matter that is structured along five themes: policies and strategies; networks and partnerships; accessible tourism value chain; destination development; and accessible tourism experiences. This second volume concludes with stating that accessible tourism should be part of a strategically planned process, which specifically provides information across all market segments or specifically targets the accessible market.

Thus, both books clearly outline how accessible tourism can be defined, studied, interpreted and applied by the industry. Although the authors take universal design and access for all as a starting point and do not focus exclusively on people with disabilities, both volumes primarily deal with people with bodily impairments. With the current changes in our (western) society it can be questioned whether this is not too limited. We should realise that we have to deal with an increasing diversity in our society and, for example, a widening gap between the rich and the poor and the haves and the have nots. If we really want to understand how accessible tourism contributes to the quality of life and thus to responsible and sustainable tourism development, it might be worthwhile to broaden the perspective by adding perspectives such as psychological, social, economic, and geographic accessibility to the physical accessibility that is the primary focus of both books, which would go even a step further than the leisure constraints approach applied to tourism.

To understand the future of accessible tourism it needs to be considered how wider demographic, economic, social, technological, ecological and political developments in our society might affect the accessibility of tourism, both at the demand side, the supply side and the regulatory side. When the theoretical approach to accessible tourism would be broadened to include the business environmental context, it would raise new perspectives of how governments and the industry could anticipate changes in accessibility adequately. An example is the Greek islands where wealthy tourists are faced with refugees on the beach, or the increase of new tourists from the BRIC countries.

If we consider the demographic and social changes in the western world it is not a surprise that accessible tourism is emerging as a field of academic study and industrial practice and that the UNWTO states that accessible tourism should be regarded as essential part of responsible and sustainable tourism development. With this in mind both books provide a benchmark in the emerging field of study and industrial practice, both from a theoretical perspective and a practical perspective. The large width and depth of the perspectives and subjects covered make it clearly suitable for academics, policy makers and practitioners. For academics the first volume offers concrete suggestions for further study and discourses from different theoretical

and disciplinary perspectives.

For governments and various sectors in the tourism industry the second volume provides many concrete ideas to put accessible tourism in practice. However, to contribute even more to the responsible and sustainable development of tourism it is suggested to include perspectives of psychological, social, economic, and geographic accessibility. To be able to understand the future of accessible tourism it is recommended to add the affect of wider developments in society and tourism on our understanding of accessibility.

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