The end of tourism? Contemplations of collapse

Freya Higgins-Desbiolles

Abstract

Purpose – This viewpoint engages with Jem Bendell's deep adaptation framework which was developed as a response to the threat of collapse. Proponents of deep adaptation argue that societal collapse is either likely, inevitable or already underway. The deep adaptation framework is employed as a tool to contemplate the necessary adaptation of tourism development and planning in a context of polycrisis leading to collapse.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual viewpoint article that is built on deductive analysis of recent events, reports and scientific findings. It employs the deep adaptation framework to analyse possible alternative tourism futures in the face of the threat of collapse.

Findings – Bendell's framework included four aspects of response to the recognition of the threat of collapse: resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation. In this work, the deep adaptation framework is employed to analyse what a deep adaptation approach to tourism might offer for efforts in securing optimal social and ecological outcomes. Findings highlight damaging activities that we should relinquish, more resilient approaches that communities could encourage and restorative practices such as rewilding and pluriversal economies as protective measures. This work recommends a precautionary approach to transform tourism education, research and practice in order to secure better tourism futures.

Originality/value – This work is novel in engaging with the threat of future collapse and in using the deep adaptation framework to consider alternative tourism futures.

Keywords Climate change, Just transitions, Collapse, Deep adaptation, Rethinking tourism, Regenerative tourism, Tourism futures, Climate justice

Paper type Viewpoint

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1. Introduction

> Human pressures have put the Earth system on a trajectory moving rapidly away from the stable Holocene state of the past 12,000 years, which is the only state of the Earth system we have evidence of being able to support the world as we know it (Rockström *et al.*, 2023, n.p.).

In 2023, media reported a number of climate-induced emergencies, leading United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres to assert that "the era of global boiling has arrived" (Guterres, 2023). Soon thereafter, the nation of Iran announced a national two-day shut down as temperatures in some parts exceeded 50 °C (Reuters, 2023). Globally, there were travel warnings to countries around the world as fires, smoke pollution, heat waves, floods and storms struck communities. Complicating the situation further is the emergence of "polycrisis", "where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part" (World Economic Forum (WEF, 2023); these multiple crises take environmental, economic, financial, social and political forms. As a result, scientists are increasingly contemplating collapse (e.g. Jones and Steffen, 2019). This viewpoint article will explore the future of tourism in the face of potential collapse, based on engagement with Professor Jem Bendell's work on "deep adaptation" (2020; 2021). Here we contemplate how we might adapt tourism development and planning to a future threatening impending collapse. Such critical analysis is intended to identify optimum ways to

ensure our ability to salvage as much as possible for current humans, future generations and more-than-human kin.

The pressures of industrialised, capitalist economies have dealt profound damage to the climate, biosphere and biodiversity (Rockström et al., 2023). Jones and Steffen warned that "cascading tipping points in the Earth system – such as melting ice sheets and forest collapse – may be existential long-term threats" (2019, n.p.). Steel et al. (2022, p. 2) explained that lack of action on climate change might result in "civilisational collapse", described as "the loss of societal capacity to maintain essential governance functions, especially maintaining security, the rule of law, and the provision of basic necessities such as food and water". The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that "the likelihood of abrupt and/or irreversible changes increases with higher global warming levels" (2023, p. 18). Recognition of the growing likelihood of collapse has catalysed a new interdisciplinary field of study called "collapsology" in France and it has gained some traction in French politics and society (Servigne et al., 2021).

Alarmingly, tourism authorities have failed to sufficiently engage with the threat of collapse. A central flaw is the failure to challenge the expansionary, growth logic of tourism in an era when human-induced climate change and overshoot of planetary boundaries presents an existential threat (Dwyer, 2017; Rastegar et al., 2023). Work by Gössling et al. found that ". . . without mitigation efforts, tourism will deplete 40% of the world's remaining carbon budget to 1.5 °C. Yet, the most powerful decarbonization measures face major corporate, political and technical barriers" (2023, p. 1).

A recent study from the European Commission entitled "Regional impact of climate change on European tourism demand" (Matei et al., 2023) illustrates the tendency to downplay the crisis climate change presents for the tourism industry. This report projected under a 4° warming scenario, "overall impact on European tourism demand is expected to be positive, with a projected rise of 1.58% for the highest warming scenario" (Matei et al., 2023, p. 29). While this report did note there would be heterogenous experiences across Europe (e.g. northern regions would be likely to fare better than the Mediterranean), it clearly understates the reality of the threat that would accompany a world of 4° of warming.

While adaptation is now widely agreed as vital, efforts of some sectors such as tourism are focused on maintaining "business as usual" for as long as possible. Lamb et al. (2020) provided a useful conceptualisation in their discussion of discourses of "delayed climate action", which work to discourage needed climate action so profits can continue. These discourses are adopted by industries such as tourism that prefer incremental adaptation measures that allow industries to continue operating without radical change; examples can be seen in tourism's aviation sector where currently unavailable technologies such as "zero carbon planes" and direct air capture of greenhouse gases are championed (see Peeters et al., 2016). However, ongoing climate change is rapidly reducing the range of viable adaptation options. This is why some experts are turning to thoughts of "deep adaptation".

This analysis will engage with the framework of Jem Bendell's deep adaptation analysis (2020; 2021). His framework included four aspects of response to recognition of the likelihood of collapse: resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation. The point of his analysis is not to search for illusive/elusive solutions to climate change but rather determine how best to come to terms with the stark reality of the situation we face. Bendell's work recommends developing a dialogue and fostering a community of practice to save what we can and to develop care in this context of disruption and collapse. In this viewpoint, this framework is used as a tool to consider how we might make a deep adaptation in tourism practices, tourism education and tourism research in the face of such possible futures.

2. Applying the deep adaptation framework: resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation

2.1 Resilience in the face of collapse

As we try to adapt to the enormous and unpredictable changes that the era of polycrisis will bring, we will have decisions to make about what we act to save and how to go about this. According to

Bendell, resilience requires us to consider "how do we keep what we really want to keep?" (2020, p. 21). This will necessitate difficult choices in tourism.

Resilience is "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks" (Walker et al., 2004, p. 2). This articulation might be understood in one of two ways: resilience as "bounce-back" from a shock or resilience as a form of adaptive change. The Tourism Panel on Climate Change (TPCC) has called for a new era of climate resilient tourism (TPCC, 2023). One critical interpretation of the focus on "climate resilient tourism" it that the TPCC is more focused on sustaining tourism growth and profits rather than curtailing tourism as a significant source of non-essential emissions when we must act with urgency to reduce emissions to avoid collapse (see TPCC, 2023, pp. 7–8). The TPCC efforts to date are congruent with what Lamb et al. (2020, p. 2) identified as pushing "non-transformative solutions" in order to avoid the necessity of disruptive change; Lamb et al. delineate non-transformative solutions as technological optimism, "all talk, little action", fossil fuel solutionism and "no sticks, just carrots". This approach also seems incongruent with the reality of unpredictable tipping points and crises we confront, as few places are likely to remain unscathed. Business as usual is going to become increasingly untenable everywhere under these conditions.

In the tourism studies literature, Hall et al. (2018) demonstrated that tourism studies' engagement with resilience has been relatively recent, lacking clear conceptualisation and tending to focus on economic and ecological resilience and particular levels such as communities and regions. Dredge argued that the "default" approach in most tourism studies of resilience is one that is human-centred and "scientific in its knowledge inputs" (2019, p. 60). She offered critical interrogations of "what kind of resilience and for what/whom" and challenged us to situate tourism in a complex, more-than-human world. Resilience must also be understood in relation to human vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are not accidental but are instead often imposed and built over long periods of time. The recent Maui fires of 2023 provide an illustrative example as the community lacked the water to fight the fires because of decades of overuse and privatisation by hotels and golf courses (Klein and Sproat, 2023). Clearly, resilience policies and actions require critical interrogations that unmask power, exploitation and profiteering.

Accepting the likelihood of collapse, we might anticipate that the global tourism system will also collapse. Those communities that have considerable dependency on tourism will find themselves exceedingly vulnerable, particularly Global South communities and Island states. The theorisation of "localising tourism" offers one model of resilience in tourism futures to consider. Localising tourism means "defining tourism by the local community, local community empowerment, more localised geographies of travel and tourism, localising decision-making to the lowest level (subsidiarity) and the local interrelationships between people, place, ecology and all living things" (Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2022, p. 2)

Resilience will not prove sufficient to cope with the types of changes we are set to experience. This is particularly because our societies continue to demand resources and pollution sinks from the Earth system at extraordinary levels. We must also relinquish some of the ideologies, practices and lifeways that have led us into this situation.

2.2 Relinquishment of that which no longer serves us

Those taking a critical perspective would argue that it is the neoliberal capitalism that has led us to the human overshoot of fixed planetary boundaries (e.g. Fletcher, 2011). Therefore, in adapting to the future, we will need to change significantly including relinquishing some things that are taken for granted. The principle of "relinquishment" asks us "what do we need to let go of in order to not make matters worse?" (Bendell, 2020, p. 21).

Careful attention to the source of the situation rather than the symptoms is essential. Mike Joy noted: "The climate crisis is seen as a problem requiring a solution rather than a symptom of

overshoot. The problem is generally formulated as looking for a way to maintain current lifestyles in the wealthy world, rather than reducing overshoot" (2023). This suggests that resorting to technological fixes to sustain "business as usual" may only exacerbate our difficulties rather than resolve the underpinning unsustainable lifeways enjoyed in the Global North and the gross inequalities in sharing the Earth's finite resources. A brief engagement with metrics of inequalities will help illuminate just how much of our predicament is an inequality crisis as much as it is a climate crisis. For instance, "In 2019, fully 40% of total U.S. emissions were associated with income flows to the highest earning 10% of households" (Starr *et al*., 2023, p. 1). In terms of air travel, Gössling and Humpe outlined the stark global inequality: "the share of the world's population travelling by air in 2018 was 11%, with at most 4% taking international flights" (2020, p. 1). They further argued that a minute elite of the most frequent fliers, representing at most 1% of the world population, "likely accounts for more than half of the total emissions from passenger air travel" (Gössling and Humpe, 2020, p. 1). These facts require us to centre structural justice in order to get at the root causes.

The principle of relinquishment would lead us to interrogate tourism's contribution to the crisis and act to arrest that contribution. This might include addressing tourism's contributions to greenhouse gas emissions through activities such as long-haul flights (see Gössling and Humpe, 2020). But taking the wider perspective, it should also be focused on addressing tourism's contribution to the wider drivers of these crises, including contributing to a "culture-ideology of consumption" that has in part caused our circumstances (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). Under capitalist globalisation, the culture-ideology of consumption is the essential pillar for continuous growth as it induces "wants" (for travel, for luxury items, for prestige and status conveyed through consumer choices).

There are growing social movements delineating what we must relinquish in tourism in order to arrest tourism's contribution to non-essential consumption adding to greenhouse gas emissions. For instance, Stay Grounded, a global network focused on advocacy for a just, environmentally sound transport system and for a rapid reduction in air travel, has lobbied for the reduction in flying, the ban of private jet use and the termination of frequent flyer programmes (Stay Grounded, n.d.).

If we wish to adapt with social and ecological justice in mind, we might quickly relinquish the most unjustifiable, high-pollution and elitist tourism pursuits. For instance, in current circumstances it is very difficult to justify elite travel by private jet, space tourism development and "last chance tourism" to the world's last remaining, relatively intact natural environments, such as Antarctica. This is growing more important as some destinations respond to the pressures for decarbonisation of tourism to reach "net zero by 2050" by shifting to "low volume, high-yield" tourists – another way of characterising elite tourism.

In addition to relinquishment of our present practices of self-destruction and harm, we might also pause to consider what we might restore. Reflexive consideration focused on insights from the past may help to inform our present and help us navigate the future more wisely.

2.3 Restoration of that which we mistakenly left behind

The pillar of restoration asks us: "what can we bring back to help us with the coming difficulties and tragedies?" (Bendell, 2020, p. 21). We might consider the transformations societies have undertaken to access the finance and goods of capitalism, the change in values that has occurred with marketisation and assess the real costs of these decisions and question who benefits. This might result in rethinking decisions leading to the privatisation of the commons (in a tourism context, parks and protected areas, beaches and waters). We might consider how we rebuild community connections that have been sacrificed in development decision-making; for instance, overturning decisions to allow corporates such as Airbnb access to housing that has damaged urban neighbourhoods in old European cities such as Lisbon and Barcelona. As Bendell (2023, n.p.) has explained, his view is that collapse of the current civilisation will lead us to "collapsing into communities" and we need to now act to ensure that communities are prepared for a just transition.

Rewilding is a type of restoration that may play an important role in restoring ecologies, biodiversity and human-nature relationships. Rewilding in brief refers to allowing natural processes to recover and return to places previously impacted by human interventions, even urban areas. Rewilding has also been described as a wider social movement (Bekoff, 2014). Restoration of pluriversal economies should also be on the cards, as the global capitalist system has been pressing monocultures on Global South communities through debt and development traps (including dependency on continued revenues from fossil fuel extraction to pay off debt). Restoring or reviving such pluriversal approaches will reduce vulnerabilities and restore resilience (see one example in Little, 2022).

Similarly, there are enduring forms of more humanistic tourism that have been overshadowed by the corporatised forms of tourism. This includes niches such as social tourism, solidarity tourism, educational tourism and pilgrimages. Additionally, greater support for social enterprises, non-governmental organisations and workers' co-operatives in tourism (see Fletcher *et al*., 2023) might prove more socially sustainable than government subsidies for large tourism multinational corporations. Regenerative tourism promises even greater transformation as it focuses on tourism's role in transitioning to a regenerative economy. As Bellato, Frantzeskaki and Nygaard state: "regenerative tourism is a transformational approach that aims to fulfil the potential of tourism places to flourish and create net positive effects through increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems" (2023, p. 1034).

2.4 Reconciliation with all whom we owe care

The final pillar of Bendell's deep adaptation framework is "reconciliation". This addresses the question with what/whom must we make peace as we recognise our mutual vulnerabilities and mortality (Bendell, 2020, p. 21). This is arguably the more open-ended pillar of the framework, as the possibilities are many.

One form of reconciliation we might consider is the human relationship to "nature". The "biophilia hypothesis" suggests "that humans have evolved with nature to have an affinity for nature" (Jimenez *et al*., 2021, p. 1). However, with processes of modernisation and capitalism many people living in the Global North and in cities have become estranged from nature. Findings that human health benefits from nature are numerous (see Jimenez *et al*., 2021) and experiences during COVID lockdowns only underscored how important access to nature truly is. How we may better relate to and care for the natural world may be one of the most significant acts of reconciliation we may make. One of the paradoxes of tourism is that it can cause environmental devastation and yet, in its "eco" form, it may also support learning about, reconnecting with and caring for nature.

Reconciliation also might be required between communities of people. Stinson, Hurst and Grimwood ask how might we ". . . design, develop, and manage tourism landscapes and installations that might further encourage the awakening of an ethics of reconciliation" (2022, p. 10). The impacts of polycrisis are likely to foster social tensions and violence, so tourism's capacities to foster inter- and intra-societal reconciliations will only grow in importance. Collapse also compels us to face reconciliation with the injustices we are likely to bequeath future generations. This realisation might guide us to embracing an ethos of down-shifted, collective sufficiency, voluntary simplicity, frugality, direct democracy and radical localisation (Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2022).

3. Implications for tourism research, tourism education and practice

The findings from this analysis applying the four aspects of deep adaptation to tourism indicate we require wise planning, which might be best based on the precautionary principle. Fennell argued that applying the precautionary principle is vital in our tourism planning where failure to act

appropriately could result in significant future harms (2015, p. 68). This analysis of deep adaptation thinking challenges us to consider how we act in tourism to secure human and more-than-human welfare to the greatest extent possible in times of polycrisis.

Firstly, tourism academia might require profound rethinking. We need to be attentive to the futures of tourism graduates by ensuring that they are not placed in debt for degrees with limited futures. Instead of guiding students to careers leading an unsustainable tourism industry, we might be wise to reposition tourism studies to be focused on tourism and recreation for local well-being rather than growth-focused tourism. Just as tourism education evolved to be dominated by location in business schools, it might now be best located in recreation and leisure schools which are arguably better geared to human and ecological well-being.

Tourism studies and tourism research need to be conducted with greater mindfulness of normative approaches and ethical values, especially in these times of crossing planetary boundaries and confronting multiple, cascading crises. Sound thinking now might guide us to some practical measures, as well. Higham and Font (2019) advocated a "low carbon" model for academia that would ensure the sector played its part in needed reductions, which should include shifting academic conference and meetings to virtual gatherings.
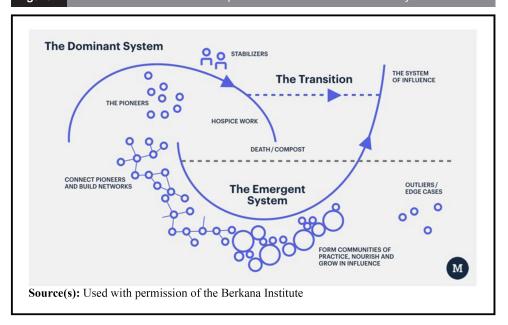
As discussed in earlier sections, tourism practices must also change. As the Maui case demonstrated, the tensions between local communities and tourists are exacerbated in the disaster situations that are unfolding from these polycrises. Tourists will be torn in their decisions to forego travel when communities are struggling to recover, especially when rebooking and insurance cover may be an issue (Chung and Kircher, 2023). The micro, small and medium enterprises of tourism, which pre-dominate numerically in tourism, will find it hard to offer such flexibility when tourism seasons become less predictable due to crises; this may mean that government support for tourism will become increasingly required (for an example, see Little and Ke, 2023). Proactive shifting to prioritisation of domestic and regional travel circuits makes sound sense in this time of polycrisis.

Additionally, we might consider how communities and certain other tourism stakeholders might take proactive control of their futures. Work on "insurgent planning" may be particularly suited to this era of transitions during polycrisis, which describes communities setting their own planning agendas and actions for better futures (see Just Collapse, 2023, p. 12). Fletcher *et al*. (2023) have proposed "eroding tourism" through "pathways to a post-capitalist tourism". This is part of a degrowth analysis and contribution to the "socialising tourism" agenda.

Scoping out to the wider context, it is essential that we transition away from globalising capitalism in the face of these urgencies. Not only does neoliberal, globalising capitalism directly contribute to the crises we face through its demand for endless growth driving economies, it also privatises, individualises and commodifies thereby undermining the cooperation we will require to address the impacts of collapse. It has also overseen a global system of great inequity between the Global North and South which also works against agreement on climate action agendas. Such facts suggest the need to overturn this dominant system and embark on a just transition to another way of living (see Figure 1). It can be very difficult to imagine such a transition; however, Figure 1 shows how pioneers can act to build networks and communities of practice that create a transition to a new system. This may be best illustrated in the tourism domain by the regenerative tourism movement (see Bellato *et al*., 2023).

This viewpoint has briefly explained how building local community capacities for care represent the most promising path to deep adaptation. Correspondingly in tourism, localising tourism may prove essential. As Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby (2022) explained, diverse communities around the world building their pluriversal strengths in relatedness offer a promising pathway to deep adaptation to polycrisis. They offer possibilities of just transitions to a network of communities living in new ways that are low-consumption, low-growth and high in equity and social and ecological justice.

| **Figure 1** | Berkana Institute's "Two Loops Model" of transition between systems |

Source(s): Used with permission of the Berkana Institute

4. Final thoughts

It may be that 2023 will prove to have been a watershed moment in global consciousness of the possibilities of collapse. But we should also recognise that we are only at the beginning of the climate-related disasters we will experience in our lifetimes. Tourism as we know it is coming to an end and we would be wise to prepare ourselves. As such insights can prove overwhelming, a turn to Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte's analysis of climate change may prove helpful. Whyte reminded non-Indigenous people of the dystopias colonised people have already confronted and survived:

> Some Indigenous perspectives on climate change can situate the present time as already dystopian. Instead of dread of an impending crisis, Indigenous approaches to climate change are motivated through dialogic narratives with descendants and ancestors (2018, p. 224).

These insights invite us to look at present difficulties with some humility, sense of responsibility and attention to relationalities across time and space. It is through articulating dialogic narratives with our ancestors and our descendants that we may confront what has led us to this situation of possible collapse and define what we might take forward.

This work has engaged with Bendell's deep adaption framework in order to understand how tourism might navigate a just social and ecological transition in the face of the threat of a great unravelling or collapse of the globalised capitalistic system. Addressing in succession the framework's pillars of resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation, it outlined some pathways for a more climate just approach to tourism. It is a preliminary prompt for thinking that others may take forward through empirical research or indeed argue contrary perspectives.

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