Where to, Wadden tourism? Identifying multi-scale sustainable development challenges and priorities for a resilient World Heritage Wadden Sea Region

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Introduction

The international Wadden Sea Region has developed to a mature tourism destination, but where to should it be heading in the future? That is the main issue of this paper. The tourism infrastructure of the international Wadden Sea Region, from the Dutch city of Den Helder, along the German island of Borkum and Sylt to the Danish Fanø and Esbjerg is well-developed and yearly millions of visitors come to the area. The basis for this successful development is its natural attractivity: the Wadden Sea Islands with their sandy dunes and beaches, the open space and wetlands with its many birds and seals, the clean air and the peace and quiet which can be found (Sijtsma et al., 2012). The natural assets are also core of its World Heritage status and several nature protection regimes. However, as Butler (1980) has stressed so convincingly using the tourism area life cycle (TALC) framework, the success of tourism destination cannot be taken for granted: decline may occur due to increased competition from other destinations or further development may turn out to be unsustainable for several reasons. Furthermore, tourism is not the only activity in the Wadden Sea Region, there’s fisheries, agriculture, mining of natural gas and energy power plants, car construction and maritime transport and logistics serving the urban hinterland. Each of these sector also faces sustainability challenges. Many policies are in place which somehow try to reach a more sustainable development of the trilateral Wadden Sea Region (Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, 2014), including its tourism, but reality is complex.

In this paper we will focus on sustainable tourism in the Wadden Sea Region. Our aim is to identify challenges and priorities for a sustainable development of tourism in the Wadden Sea Region. In the first part of the paper we will clarify the issue of sustainable tourism conceptually, building on scientific literature of sustainable development and sustainable tourism and resilience. Key points will turn out to be 1) understanding sustainability from a human well-being perspective, 2) taking a multi-scale perspective on tourism activity and 3) balancing demands from the people, planet and profit domains using both regulations and open governance processes. In the second part we will use this conceptual basis to empirically explore the main challenges for tourism in the Wadden Sea Region using a multi-scale approach: from global, to national, regional and local. We will position the Wadden Sea Region globally within the spectrum of World Heritage sites and its geographical distance to urban and metropolitan area, we look nationally at the spatial distribution of the fans of the area, while we zoom in locally and site specific on three case studies. The first case study focusses on balancing economic and environmental demands: the intensity of recreational boating activity across the Dutch Waddensea. The second focusses on the housing market and balancing the economic and social demands. The third focusses on bringing enhanced understanding of the issue of tourism and its sustainability among stakeholders using online tools. Finally in the third part we will

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synthesize and identify priorities for policy and governance towards a more sustainable tourism in the Wadden area.

**Theoretical framework**

The complex, multilevel dynamics of the contemporary network society and globalized economy stress the importance for industries such as tourism to be resilient as well as entire regions. In this article we elaborate on the importance of resilience for the tourism industry. We draw attention to conditions that are needed for building resilience such as diversity, experimentation and supportive institutional framework providing room for experiments and enhancing diversity. We explore the implications of building resilient tourism industry for other functions, land uses and systems (institutional framework, governance system, ecosystem) with specific reference to protected areas such as the Wadden Sea Region in the Netherlands. The article brings forth key challenges for building resilient tourism regions and develops suggestions for further research how to overcome challenges.

*Importance of building resilience for tourism*

The tourism industry is a fast evolving industry. Many places around the world are in the process of being developed as tourism destinations. This process is shaped by the actions of many firms, societal, organisations and institutions that are dispersed over multiple governance levels and often have different ambitions, interests and worldviews regarding issues at stake (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001; Urry, 2002; Parra, 2010; Hartman & De Roo, 2013). For places to transitions towards tourism destination factors need to interlock and mutually reinforce in multiple systems or domains such as the economy, culture, life styles, institutions, technology, ecology, and belief systems (Loorbach, 2007).

As a socio-spatial phenomenon tourism has been treated and managed in different ways. Particularly in protected areas (or broader, areas with ‘special’ status) we can identify three dominant ways of thinking and acting. First, tourism is being treated as an intruder of space and/or in competition or incompatible with other functions and land uses such as forestry, agriculture, nature, build heritage. Second, tourism is seen as an economic opportunity and approached (in policies) by means of quantitative goals in terms of amount of visitors, number of jobs and boosting welfare. Whereas major cities such as Venice, Paris and Amsterdam are very successful in doing so, also nowadays facing the issue of “visitor pressure” other destination are struggling to be seen, found and selected by the visitors (compare to Butler, 1980, on Tourism Area Life Cycle and Doxey, 1975, on Irritation Index). Third, tourism is used as a means to achieve wider societal goals then economic only. For instance, a source to maintain livability, as source of income to pay for upkeep of heritage and nature, as part of integrated coastal zone management, etc (compare to sustainable tourism).

Over time, rural and peri-urban landscapes that were once predominantly dominated by production (agriculture, forestry) have evolved and nowadays also face the challenge of conservation and increasingly move towards places of consumption (same for city centers that evolve nonlinearly from marketplaces via shopping centers to a décor for leisure activities such as events).

But many places undergo this transition, the competition is increasing and visitors have a vast range of options to select from. This puts pressure on the tourism industry in various ways. First, to stand
out from the competition and interest visitors, the emphasis shifts to offering experiences, and value creation via meaning making and ‘mattering’ (creating e.g. ‘memorable moments’ – and resulting in ‘blurring’ of industry sectors). Second, due to the increasing competition and ensuing professionalization of the industry life cycles of concepts and activities are shortening, meaning renewal and innovation is of the essence. This can be approached on the level of individual businesses, on the level of destinations or regions but also on branch or industry level. Third, the industry needs to anticipate and adapt to perturbations that can range from sudden shocks (natural and environmental disasters, terrorism, macroeconomic shocks, new technologies) and ‘slow burns’ (demographic change, climate change, lifestyle changes) that bring industries and destinations out of balance. The act of rebalancing is a key challenge that could be further explored, via literature on resilience theories and theories of complex adaptive systems for instance, to go beyond reactive responses and develop proactive, anticipatory strategies instead.

Overall, the tourism challenge for destinations is to become robust enough to endure perturbations and flexible enough to recover or to re-develop/re-invent itself – contributing to its resilience. This implies a more evolutionary-adaptive perspective, considering and managing tourism destinations as complex adaptive systems. Taking this perspective allows us to identify conditions that contribute to the ability of systems to adapt and evolve and to building resilience.

Conditions for building resilient tourism

The article elaborates on the following conditions and how they relate to and/or contribute to building resilient tourism industry (Hartman, 2016). These conditions are used as a analytical framework for the suggested case studies.

- **Focus on contextual environment**: drivers of change, stress, perturbations
- **Understand and monitor visitor demands and desires**: ‘raison d’être’, is changeable, understanding the demand side
- **Diversity, experiments**: ingredient for novelty (new niches) and self-organization (growth of niches, emergence of structure)
- **‘Possibility space’ to enable adaptation**
  - Create possibility space (structure / institutional frameworks / dilemma between avoid risks & conservation versus development & taking opportunities – see figure below)
  - Take possibility space (agency / entrepreneurship)
  - Ensure possibility space is taken (support)
- **Connectivity & interaction**: sharing perspectives, identifying urgencies, building coalitions and taking action
- **Storytelling**: create a sense of coherence, identify an (autonomous) development direction

**Where to? Implications and challenges of building resilient tourism industry for regions**

On the basis of conditions for resilient tourism industries and the case study findings we identify a range of implications that stretch further than the tourism industry, which provide a better understanding of the complexity of building resilience tourism regions – and outlines a range of challenges that need to be overcome.

- Tourism development impacts on local societies (people), local economy (profit) and local environment (planet) which, consequently, drives the need to create synergies. Then, tourism development meets other interests and could/should be approached as a means and not as a goal on its own.
- Implications for planning: shaping the ‘possibility space’ (restrictive on the one hand and enabling on the other) to subtly steer, guide and influence developments and the overall development direction of a region/system.
- Implications for governance: the above implies the need for a multi-sector, multi-actor and multi-level systems of governance (Hartman, Parra & De Roo, 2016)
- Implications for monitoring: monitoring industry diversity, growth and decline, influences and impacts between systems, match between supply and demand, adequacy of possibility space.
- Implications for capacity: building resilience puts a pressure on organizational capacities
- Implications for discourses/paradigms: resilience thinking requires the support to adopt the resilience perspective, and to adopt/support systems thinking

**References**


