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# Managing Tourism – A Missing Element?

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**Abstract:** The paper argues that despite the widespread use of the term management in the context of tourism destinations, there is little actual management of tourism or tourists in most destinations. The paper uses the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model (Butler 1980) as a lens through which to view some current issues and problems facing tourism destinations. It explores some of the basic elements of the TALC model including carrying capacity and triggers or forces bringing about change in destinations and argues that the reluctance of many stakeholders to adopt sustainable principles is reflected in current problems such as overtourism. Recognition of the often ignored political element in the sustainable triumvirate of economic, environmental and social components is important because without political support for appropriate initiatives has meant that efforts to move towards more sustainable destinations have often proved fruitless. The paper concludes that despite calls for new ways of defining success for tourism destinations and for drastically changing the nature and scale of tourism in the post-pandemic future, it is likely that tourism will resume, at least for the short to medium term, in a form very similar to what existed before the advent of COVID 19.

**Keywords:** Integral management of tourism destinations; Overtourism: adaptation to change; Resilience.

### Gestión turística ¿asignatura pendiente?

**Resumen:** Se habla mucho de la gestión turístico mas se ejerce poco. Se utiliza el modelo TALC (Butler 1980) como gran angular para explorar algunos de los temas problemáticos enfrentados por la mayoría de los destinos turísticos en la actualidad (pre-COVID). Se centra en algunos aspectos básicos del modelo TALC como son la capacidad de carga y otras fuerzas endógenas o externas desencadenantes de cambios determinantes en los destinos turísticos. Se argumenta asimismo que exista cierta reticencia por parte de muchos *stakeholders*, sobre todo los elementos políticos a la hora de gestionar para la sostenibilidad, hecho que aboca a muchos destinos al *sobreturismo* y a la pérdida de calidad de vida. Hace falta visibilizar el papel político como cuarta pata de la sostenibilidad, ya que, sin voluntad política, todo esfuerzo hacia la sostenibilidad termine fracasando. Hace falta asimismo redefinir la escala y la calidad del turismo ofrecido además de medir el éxito de un destino según parámetros muy distintos a los cuantitativos (números de turistas y cantidad bruta del gasto turístico) que se han utilizado en la época pre-pandémica: es decir, gestionar hacia la sostenibilidad y la seguridad, claves del éxito en el futuro post-COVID.

**Palabras Clave:** Gestión integral del destino turístico; Sobreturismo; Adaptación al cambio; Resiliencia.

## 1. Introduction

Society in general, has been very successful in promoting both supply and demand for tourism, as shown by the continuous rise in tourist numbers until the outbreak of COVID 19 in 2019, but has been far less successful at managing tourism and all that it implies and brings with it. Part of this failure to control and shape tourism into the forms and levels appropriate for destinations stems from a reluctance of tourism academics and professionals to study the past evolution and development of tourism. As Wall (1998, p. 36) noted:

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"It is common for authors to stress the recency of mass tourism, the volatile nature of tourism patterns, and the lack of precedents for current or future tourism phenomena. One reason for this is that few authors have placed their studies in an historical context".

Many of the problems facing tourism destinations today can be traced back to the nature of their establishment and subsequent growth, and the way tourism to them has been promoted, designed, and developed. This does not mean that the solutions to problems such as overtourism and unsustainability lie in the past but understanding the forces that have created the present situation in many destinations can certainly help in developing answers to some of the major questions facing tourism in the 21ˢᵗ Century.

The approach taken in this paper is to place the focus on issues and problems in tourism, and to use the tourism area life cycle (TALC) model (Butler 1980) to illustrate a number of key points about tourism, past, present, and future. The paper uses the TALC model as a 'lens' through which to comment on some key current issues. and problems such as sustainability and overtourism.

## 2. Tourism, impacts and change

Tourism is an essentially simple process that has become very complicated. Most tourists go on holiday to gain pleasure of some type, but this can take many forms, even on one trip, so there is a need to resist the temptation to categorise people into types of tourists or types of tourism. Most people are many types of tourists, often on the same holiday, so it can be difficult to explain what might seem conflicting behaviours and pairings, for example mass tourists going on eco-trips while on holiday at a popular resort. Such behaviour can help explain apparently conflicting attitudes, such as why so many people report that they want sustainability in tourism but in fact, practice the opposite (Ram et al.,2013)..

There are some more very basic points to make. Tourism, whatever form or dimension it takes, will have effects, or impacts. It is impossible to have tourism development with no impact or change. Impacts are often complex, not always being immediate or visible, or even only occurring where tourists are present. Impacts on the natural environment are often much simpler in cause and effect than impacts in the human cultural environment because nature follows general laws and patterns, while people on holiday are much more variable in their behaviour, preferences, and reactions. Tourism is about change, people visiting other places getting pleasure from that (one hopes) and going home happier and refreshed. Places they have visited will have earned money and gained employment; people living in those communities will have experienced a different pattern to their lives when tourists are present to when they are not there; the physical environment will have experienced wear and tear on vegetation, beaches, trails, and wildlife as a result of tourists' presence (Mathieson and Wall 1982). There will be many other effects, both at the destinations, on the routes to and from them, and elsewhere, both during tourist visitation and perhaps long afterwards. There will always be impacts, some positive and some negative. It is the responsibility of those dealing with tourism and in positions of control, to ensure that the positive impacts outweigh the negative, and if possible, to mitigate and even prevent the negative effects.

It is also important to realise that these impacts will bring about change. Tourism causes change and it responds to change, sometimes very rapidly, as in the case of COVID 19, sometimes over a long period of time at a very slow rate. Two major types of change can be identified, *revolutionary* change, such as the impact of Covid, which can be dramatic, sudden, unexpected, sometimes uncontrollable, and often of short duration rather than permanent, and *evolutionary* change, which is gradual, iterative, building on what has gone before, possibly permanent rather predictable if carefully examined, and theoretically controllable or at least capable of modification and mitigation. Change has many faces some clear, some false, some hidden, and has both temporal and spatial variations. For example, changes in transportation, mostly brought about by technological innovations, reveal that increases in speed are not the only issue to consider, there have also been massive improvements in safety, reliability, comfort, modes of travel, and locations served. Ours is the first generation to actually reduce the speed at which we can travel; the demise of the Concord airliner (on cost and safety grounds) without replacement represents a unique moment in transportation. It may be hoped that rockets and space tourism will not become popular beyond the minute numbers apparently willing to ignore environmental as well as ethical reasons for not pursuing that form of tourism but that remains to be seen.

### 3. The tourism area life cycle model as a lens

The model itself is very simple, suggesting that tourism destinations follow a generally similar path until they reach their carrying capacity, after which the destinations' direction depends on a number of factors, such as the speed, nature and dimension of tourism, their natural attributes, and their management, as well as exogenous factors beyond their control. The result may be a continued successful operation in tourism at a sustainable level, it may be continued growth at an unsustainable level, or it may be decline, and even final abandonment of tourism. The full title of the published paper (Butler 1980) (Figure 1) included the phrase "Implications for management of resources", which is why it is being used here as an approach by which to consider the issue of management of tourism. Over the four decades of its existence, this aspect of the model has been downplayed, or ignored, rather alike the management of tourism as a whole, which helps explain some of the current problems experienced in and by tourism destinations.

#### Figure 1: A tourism Area Cycle of Evolutions. R. Butler (1980: 7).
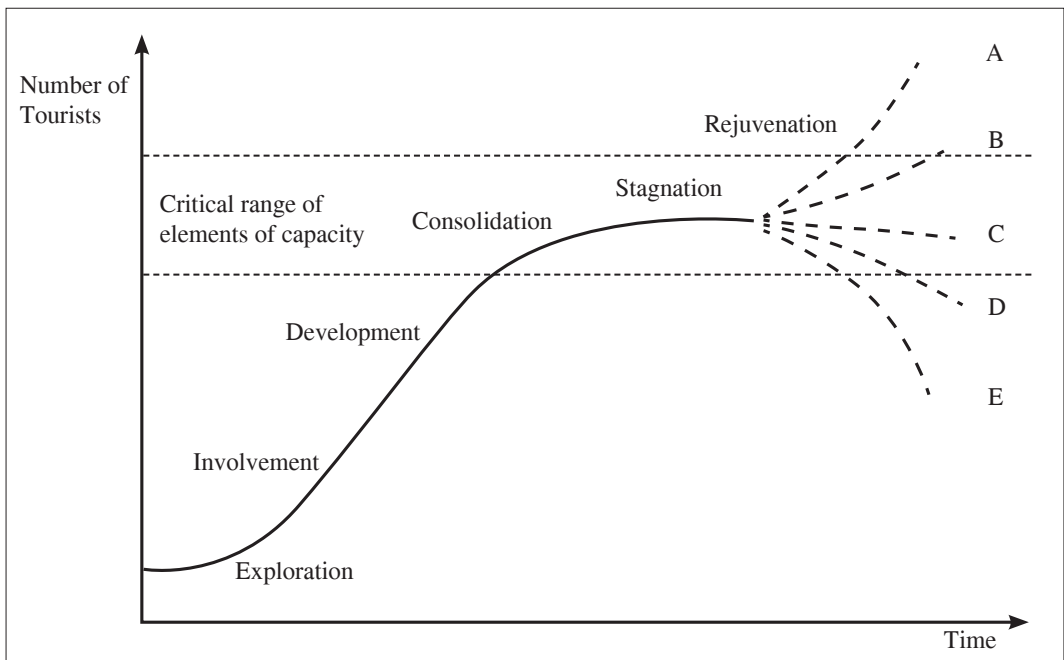


The TALC model was developed on the basis of observation and reading, more than empirical measurement in the first place, and describes a process happening globally to tourist destinations from the mid-20th Century onwards, namely that their development proceeds through stages that may 'end' in a variety of ways, or not end and continue for a long time, depending on management. That in itself may be of interest, but what is more relevant now is WHY and HOW that process came about and still occurs many years later, and WHAT if anything, can be done to make that process more sustainable: The focus being primarily on the destinations and their communities that experience the effects of tourism.

The model was conceived initially in the late 1960s, when many European destinations were experiencing major changes in markets, in transport services, in their political and economic systems and in the expectations and desires of tourists. A look at the development of tourism in Europe over the past century or more shows the early development of destinations in northern European countries, often served by railways tied to specific and local markets, gradually being supplemented, and replaced by developments around the Mediterranean, first in Italy and France, then Spain, and Portugal, Greece, then Turkey, followed by Egypt and Tunisia, as transport links and facilities developed. Old resorts

faced competition from new purpose-built resort complexes reached by fast and cheap air travel, and habits and expectations of tourists changed dramatically, even if they basically sought the traditional holiday experience but in a different setting.

The model itself was intended to describe the process of destination development. Subsequently it was found able to illustrate where a particular destination fell on the cycle by using indicators (Berry 2006), and finally could be used as a predictive model (Pechlaner and Manente 2006) to suggest what the future path of a specific destination may be. It should never be claimed that the model will accurately predict when and where a destination will go or end up, as there are too many variables involved in each individual case. The model did not suggest that any specific outcome was inevitable, particularly not decline, as has been incorrectly suggested by misinterpreting the model, as long as appropriate management was implemented. When some resorts do decline, it is appropriate and necessary to see if and how they have been managed, and whether such decline might have been avoided, and if rejuvenation could take place.

So much for the model itself, there are places which fit this pattern very closely, some destinations on the Spanish Costas for example, there are places which do not seem to fit it well, and there have been several suggestions of variations to the model (e.g., Agarwal 2002; Weaver, 2002) What is more interesting perhaps, and more pertinent in the context of problem resolution, should be some key elements of the model that warrant further investigation and have implications more widely for tourism. In particular, the model has implications for concepts currently being faced in tourism, including carrying capacity, sustainability, overtourism, and how destinations can adapt to change, such as those caused by exogenous factors like conflicts and pandemics.

## 4. Key elements of the talc

There are several key elements or principles of the model.

One basic principle is that destinations are *dynamic* and change over time. That may seem obvious now, the world has experienced rapid and extensive changes in many key variables that were not anticipated. Change can come about from many causes, including any or all of overuse, obsolescence, investment, renovation, replacement, removal, and disaster. Some changes are planned, some internal, some externally imposed, some unanticipated. Successful destinations adapt and manage change and display resilience in their response, but how success is and should be defined is being changed to include broader values than just economic ones (Dwyer 2021).

A second principle was that of a *common process* of development, namely, that most destinations show a consistent and replicated pattern of development. The causes of the process and the rate at which is proceeds vary from one destination to another, some may peak in a few years, others may take a few decades, but the overall pattern is similar in destinations across the world, even if the specific product being promoted and sold is different.

The key element in the model, is the concept of *carrying capacity* and in this respect, it was something of a forerunner of sustainable development (Butler 2019a). The model argued that development beyond the limits or the overall carrying capacity of a destination would result in a loss of quality, and in turn, a loss of market appeal. This is turn could lead to reduced visitation, reduced investment, and begin a spiral of decline that became a negative feedback loop (Russo,2002). The idea of limits to development and the need to operate within those limits is very similar to the concept of sustainable development and reflected research conducted on carrying capacity (Coccossis, 2004;Wall, 2020).

*Management* was seen as the important element in preventing over-development or inappropriate development occurring. Management of tourism, rather than just promotion, is critical if destinations are to avoid over-development, and possibly loss of appeal. In most destinations however, real management only occurs at the individual enterprise level, e.g., a hotel or a business, not by or for the destination as a whole. What are called Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) are mostly promotional bodies concerned with attracting tourists to their destination, not actually managing either the tourists or the industry. Oversight, overdevelopment and overtourism can result (Dodds and Butler 2019a). There have been a number of calls for the function of these bodies, DMOs, to be radically changed or face redundancy (Dredge 2016).

There was a strong *spatial component* in the initial concept of the model, although that was reduced in the published form. It was suggested that as one resort began to decline in appeal, competitive developments would take place spatially close as long as new sites were available, so development at a regional scale would occur, as in the Costas in Spain, the Gold Coast in Queensland in Australia, or in the

Caribbean in different islands. Location and specific environmental conditions are important prerequisites in understanding tourism development and its impacts and greatly affect the management of tourism which has to be seen as a global phenomenon needing attention at a variety of scales from local to national.

Perhaps the most intriguing and possibly important aspect of the model and tourism in general, and one not really explored in the published version is that of *triggers*. What events, agents, forces, actually bring about change? The identification of triggers of development is vital if tourism is to be managed. In many cases it has been the actions and interventions of one or more entrepreneurs, some of whom have been capable of changing the face of not only a single destination, but of tourism at a regional scale, or even of tourism itself (Butler and Russell 2010). Examples include Thomas Cook in stimulating tours and incorporating rail and steamer travel to new areas, Walt Disney creating new images and resorts on a massive scale, others changing the face of air travel (Richard Branson), or Sir Walter Scott who changed the image of a country, Scotland. There are many forces acting on destinations that can bring about change (Figure 2) some local endogenous ones, some exogenous, some intentional in terms of changing tourism, and some unintentional and unanticipated There is a need for much more research on the causes of change and how they interact with each other and the destinations and their markets.

**Figure 2: Factors of change in the destination areas.**
**Based on Weaver & Oppermann, 2000**
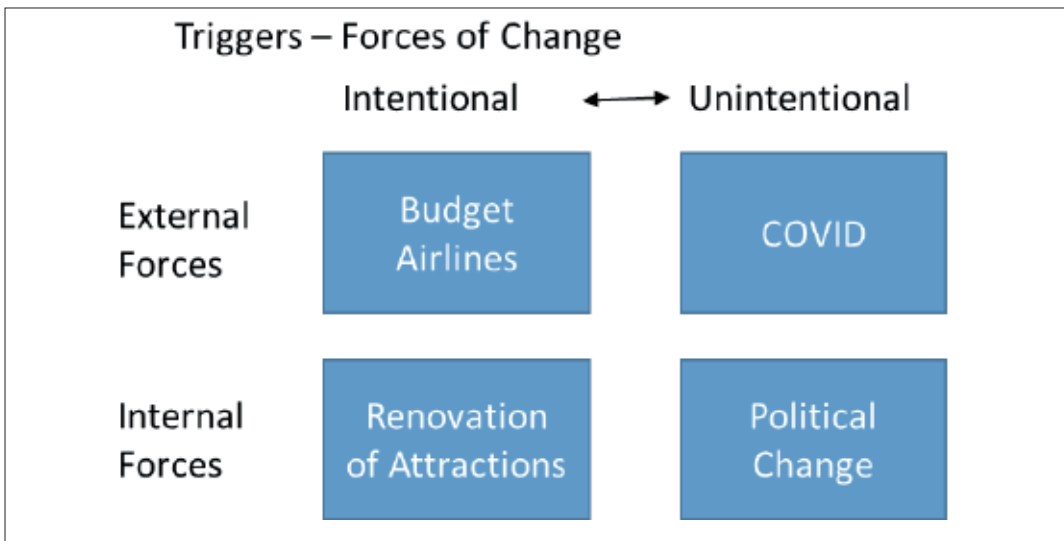


There are clear limitations to the model. One is the difficulty in identifying the specific stages of the development process, as not all indicators may be at the same phase of development. Visitor numbers as suggested for the measure of development in the original model are ambiguous. They were identified because they are the most common and easily accessed measure of tourism, but destinations should want to focus on net benefits not just numbers. The argument is increasingly being made that even measures like value added are not sufficient, and that communities should focus on the overall well-being of all stakeholders rather than on purely economic measures of success (Dwyer 2020).

Destinations at different stages of the model may have different carrying capacities and thresholds and offer different products at different stages of development. Zimmermann's (1997) work is relevant here, showing that it is not only destinations which have cycles, but activities and types of tourism also. Zimmermann crucially noted the effect of a break in a cycle of development, many of which have been due to conflicts (Weaver 2002) and disasters, for example World War II or more recently in the Balkans (Jordan 2000). Currently of course, destinations are experiencing such a break in tourism in many places, through Covid. In the case of Covid the break has been much more complicated and unique than at any other time. Covid has affected almost every country and reduced both international and domestic tourism at the same time because of quarantines and lockdowns and affected destinations

differently depending on their stage of development in the TALC model (Butler 2021b). How destinations respond once this is over will determine the future of many destinations and is currently an area of great speculation (see articles in the Special Issue of *Tourism Geographies* Vol 22, No. 3, 2020).

It might be better to see destination development as a continuum rather than in specific stages, although research (Keller 1987) has shown periods of instability between stages that suggests there may be definitive changes in situations that justify identifying steps or stages in development. The TALC is a model, a scaled down simplification of reality, and all that implies. It does not and cannot illustrate every aspect of destination development because aggregation and simplification are unavoidable, and one person's model is another person's target. Academic and applied criticism are to be welcomed because all models should be capable of being modified, amended, expanded, and contracted, and even abandoned. A disconcerting and disturbingly honest appraisal of academic use of the model, and by implication, other references, are seen in the short note by Wang et al in *Annals of Tourism Research* (Wang et al, 2016).

While the TALC may describe how destinations develop, a few places differ from the model. One is Las Vegas, which has defied the process and just continued to grow. Is it that it is too big to fail? That is not acceptable, more likely it is a combination of factors that have enabled it to survive the loss of its monopoly on gaming some decades ago (when most states in the USA approved gambling) and continue to grow despite competition from places like Macao, now the leader in gross earnings from gambling. Key among these factors is image. Like Disney, Las Vegas is perceived as THE place to go to gamble, somehow bigger and better than competitors, and as such, it attracts people from not only across the USA but also from Canada and from Europe. It has a very successful DMO in terms of promotion that is able to gain mass support, if not unanimity, of agreement amongst stakeholders in the town about continued growth. Importantly, new facilities are viewed as new attractions rather than competition; and there is none of the reluctance to demolish attractions and replace them with new ones, that may be found in some destinations. The result is that Las Vegas is constantly renewing itself and its appeal. Perhaps finally, it is not particularly worried about any natural attributes or the environment in the way that many destinations are and will happily expand and modify its footprint to meet market demand. It also, so far, has had political and entrepreneurial support for continued expansion. This combination of factors may reveal something, perhaps something not liked by some academics, about how to achieve growth in tourism.

## 5. Sustainability, management and success

The TALC model has been described as a forerunner of sustainable tourism and also to resilience (Butler 2019b). It has similarities to sustainability, but not to sustainable tourism except in the literal meaning, of keeping tourism going. Sustainable tourism is a misnomer, because tourism, with its essential travel component (one must travel to be a tourist), is inevitably unsustainable, as almost all travel is reliant on non-renewable energy resources. This is one of the reasons why tourism has been relatively unsuccessful in achieving anything close to sustainable development at the global scale. It is possible to be very sustainable in terms of the operation of a specific facility such as a hotel or a particular attraction by using renewable energy, local materials and food, local labour, and minimizing any negative impacts as much as possible. However, at a destination level, when one includes travel, and large numbers of tourists, this is next to impossible. Even a large number of almost sustainable new projects will make very little difference to the global unsustainable dimension of mass tourism. They are simply adding more attractions and probably involving a considerable amount of long-haul travel for their market to reach them.

Such comments are not anti-sustainable development, but rather, an attempt to emphasise that sustainability is a very difficult concept to apply to tourism, particularly international tourism, and there is a need to be realistic when describing tourism as sustainable (Butler 2013). Society should make every effort to become MORE sustainable, and in particular in the context of tourism, work hard to make all forms of mass tourism more sustainable. Such a process would be much more effective globally than creating additional sustainable destinations. All too often, what starts out as a sustainable destination can readily become unsustainable as it becomes more popular and developed.

The focus on carrying capacity and limits to development in the TALC model are obviously similar to the principles of the early days of conservation, and the pioneering efforts of Rachel Carson (1962) and the Club of Rome (Meadows et al 1972). The dynamic element is also similar in that sustainability can never be a static state but something always changing and responding to change, not the "holy grail' but a "guiding fiction" as McCool and Moisey (2008) described, something aimed for but never reached. Without moving towards sustainability, experiencing problems such as overtourism in some locations becomes almost inevitable.

Sustainability does mean a long-term view, which is what destinations have to take, but it is important not to fall into the trap of arguing that sustainable tourism, whatever that is, is better than mass tourism. The two aspects of tourism are complementary rather than competitive. The mass tourism market will not suddenly become sustainable, there is not sufficient scope nor sufficient opportunities for that, even if preferences were changed. The best that can be argued for is that mass tourism becomes MORE sustainable. Making each of the billions of mass tourism trips more sustainable would be infinitely better for the world than establishing new facilities for a few hundred sustainable tourists. Developments which are sustainable when they start can become unsustainable as they become more successful without appropriate management and even move into overtourism. Several of the recommendations in the study by Weber and colleagues are highly relevant in this respect, including "Stakeholder participation is key;" "It's all about responsibility;" and "You can't manage what you don't measure" (Weber et al 2017, 213-217).

There needs to be a refocus on what is meant by success in tourism and a move away from purely numbers of visitors and even away from total amount of expenditure. Until that is done, destinations will always face the potential threat of overtourism and overdevelopment because economic priorities nearly always win out when in competition with social and environmental priorities. The triple leg model of sustainable development is not really correct, it should be seen as a four-legged mode with the fourth leg being political (Butler, 2013). However strong the other legs may be, if they are not politically acceptable to those in power, then they will not 'win.' There are examples of sensible actions that have been taken to improve sustainability only for them to fail politically at the next electoral process and be rescinded (e.g., Calvia, (Dodds, 2007). It has been argued that that at least a part of the reason for the failure to mitigate and prevent overtourism is the lack of political will to take the necessary actions (Dodds and Butler 2022).

What is good for the destination environment and its residents should also be good for tourists and the tourism industry and being more sustainable should be economically beneficial and not punitive to either the industry or tourists. It should cost less to be more sustainable, both as a provider and as a consumer, and this needs to become reality if efforts to persuade large numbers of people and many operators to really become more sustainable are to be successful. Increasingly there are arguments for success in tourism to include elements of well-being for local residents of destinations as well as suppliers and consumers. While some statements encouraging such a position may be rather unrealistic (Everingham and Chassagne 2020), the argument to move beyond a purely economic focus for development is a powerful one and one that should sit comfortably with a move towards increased sustainability.

**Figure 3: Factors affecting action for sustainability. After Dodds and Butler, 2009.**
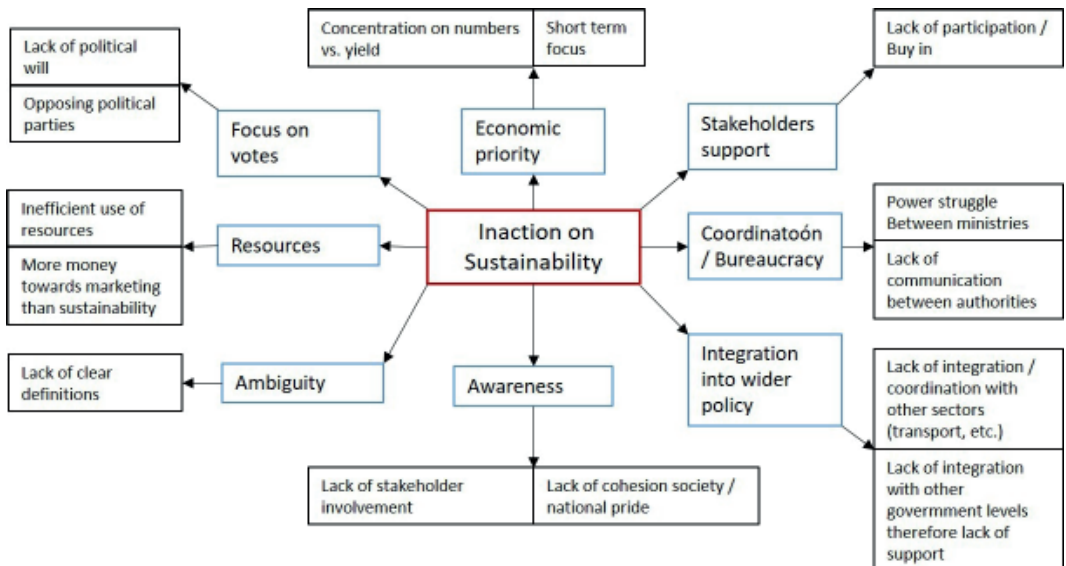
Many of the factors that work against becoming more sustainable in tourism are the same problems that have prevented places from successfully preventing or mitigating the most recent problem of overtourism. There are eight factors shown in Figure 2 which tend to prevent or reduce action to increase sustainability, and each of these is linked to other more specific issues. Not all of these elements apply in all destinations but depressingly enough of them seem to exist in many places to limit the necessary positive actions to achieve greater levels of sustainability.

## 6. Conclusions

The key to destinations achieving success, however defined or measured, will remain as it always has been: *adaptation* to new circumstances, *adoption* of appropriate policies and measures, and *application* of appropriate actions to meet constraints and demands. There is a lot still to do, and tourism management is the key to such success. Covid has done one useful thing for tourism, it has demonstrated to governments and populations how important tourism is to so many people, not just in economic terms but in terms of the their mental health and well-being. To achieve true success in tourism may mean refocusing priorities for established destinations, which is where management becomes even more crucially important.

Competition for success in tourism is now global, not just local, so hot springs in Iceland compete with hot springs in New Zealand, and beaches in Spain with beaches in Thailand. Destinations need to focus on developing for the long term and a more sustainable success that will ensure their future, mitigate negative aspects, and gain support from residents, the industry, and tourists. Destinations need to coordinate and integrate the core elements of their development, their physical and human environments, their resources, and their governance, control their interactions, and establish a common goal of what success in tourism means for their own stakeholders.

Will Covid persuade the industry and consumers to change radically (Lew et al 2020)? This is very unlikely, and it is more probable that Covid will result in pent-up latent demand suddenly surging as restrictions are lifted in exactly the same way as tourism has performed before. Covid has changed the traditional trip model by affecting where we travel in the short term, such that being able to get somewhere and return home again without facing quarantine has taken priority temporarily over the attributes of specific destinations (Butler 2021a). That change is likely to be temporary and patterns of tourism will revert to a state near the former normality. Some places will benefit by being the first to open after Covid, some will benefit from being seen as very safe to visit, and others will be perceived as less attractive in the short term at least, because of supposed danger of infection or because of having gained a negative image related to Covid. There will be many questions to ask and answer and equally, many important and difficult decisions to be made and not everyone will be content with directions taken or not taken. Despite all the chaos and misery stemming from Covid, and despite the many innovations that will inevitably appear in the future, based on past experiences, tourism will continue much as it has for the last few centuries. On the basis of what has been learned about the phenomenon of tourism over the past years, the management of tourism in the post-Covid era will be more important than ever.

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