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# TRADITIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM STUDIES

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**Abstract:** As sustainability has become an important policy issue in tourism, it is arousing growing discussion and criticism, and an increasing need to understand the nature of the limits of growth. This paper analyzes how these limits are approached and evaluated in discussions on a local scale. The purpose is to recognize that behind the different understandings of them lie distinct traditions that are different in their focuses. These are referred to as resource-, activity-, and community-based traditions of sustainability. Further, the relationship between sustainable tourism and sustainable development is critically discussed. **Keywords:** sustainable development, carrying capacity, community-based tourism. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Résumé:** Traditions de la durabilité dans les études de tourisme. À mesure que la durabilité est devenue un sujet important dans la politique du tourisme, il a suscité des débats et des critiques croissants aussi bien qu'un plus grand besoin de comprendre la nature des limites de l'expansion. Cet article analyse comment on approche et évalue ces limites dans des discussions à l'échelle locale. Le but est de faire reconnaître que derrière les différentes façons de comprendre les limites, il y a diverses traditions qui diffèrent sur leur objectif. On parle des traditions de durabilité basées sur des ressources, des activités ou la communauté. En plus, le rapport entre le tourisme durable et le développement durable est analysé avec un oeil critique. **Mots-clés:** développement durable, capacité de charge, tourisme basé sur la communauté. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the impacts of tourism have received increasing attention in discourses and studies on related development. The industry has a tremendous capacity for generating growth in destination areas. On the other hand, its increasing impacts have led to a range of evident and potential problems and of environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political issues in destinations and systems, creating a need for alternative and more environment- and host-friendly practices in development, planning, and policies.

During the 90s, the issue of sustainability entered a discourse which started to direct the economic and political structures that constitute

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the present larger context of the tourism system, the industry and its development (Bramwell and Lane 1993; Mowforth and Munt 1998). The major academic concern over its negative effects dates back at least to the 60s, however, and to the tradition of research into carrying capacity. Over two decades, this idea formed a basis for approaching and managing negative impacts, but after the period of enthusiasm from the late 60s to the early 80s, it was realized that carrying capacity could be problematic both in theory and in practice (O'Reilly 1986; Wall 1982). By the early 90s, this issue was largely replaced in research and development discourses by the idea of sustainable tourism.

Nowadays sustainability can be linked to almost all kinds and scales of tourism activities and environments (Clarke 1997), but there is also increasing criticism of the idea, its practices, and its usability (Garrod and Fyall 1998; Hunter 1995; Liu 2003; Sharpley 2000). Surprisingly, many challenges outlined for sustainable tourism appear rather similar to past issues concerning carrying capacity. Therefore, it is easy to agree with Butler (1999:15) when he asks critically whether the current ideas and discussions of the former are anything new.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the idea and nature of sustainable tourism and especially how the limits of growth are characterized, known, and set in principle. The work is conceptual in nature, but rather than providing a comprehensive definition of the concept or accepting any single definition of sustainable tourism, or carrying capacity for that matter, the purpose here is to recognize that behind the different understandings of the limits of growth there lie several distinct traditions that differ in focus and in their relation to the resources used in destinations. These traditions are characterized by different ontological ideas of the general nature and character of the limits of growth, different epistemological perspectives on them, and how they can be known and defined. The analysis is based on previous studies of tourism and its limits of growth. Although the impacts of the industry are increasingly global, the main focus of research, management, and policy activities has been on local character and its consequences, which is the scale of analysis adopted here. However, there is a growing need to recognize global-scale issues and responsibilities in development as well. The conditions under which (sustainable) tourism could represent a tool for wider sustainable development are discussed in the conclusions.

### *Need for the Limits of Growth*

The demand for more environmentally sensitive and sustainable practices in tourism grew rapidly in the 80s, on the strength of several long-term, interrelated processes in Western societies which were manifested during that decade. The term and idea of sustainability was transferred to tourism from the ideology of sustainable development following the publication of the Brundtland Commission's report *Our Common Future* in 1987 (WCED 1987). There had been some academic and policy discussions on sustainability and the limits of growth

in tourism prior to the Brundtland report (Gössling and Hall 2005a), but ever since the report sustainability has been the central theme in discussions on tourism and policies for its management.

The commission's report defines sustainable development as a process that meets the needs of present generations without endangering the ability of future ones to meet their own needs (WCED 1987). Sustainability rests on three integrated elements: the ecological, socio-cultural, and economic. In addition, there are three fundamental principles: futurity, equity, and holism (Redcliffe and Woodgate 1997). After the United Nations "Earth Summit" in 1992, the need to enforce the principles of sustainable development within wider economic and social processes highlighted the role of sustainability and tourism's potential for advancing the goals of such development (Berry and Ladkin 1997; Pigram and Wahab 1997).

The growing need for sustainability was also a result of increased knowledge and concern about tourism impacts and environmental issues in general (Holden 2003:95–96). Many of these issues date back to the 60s and 70s, reflecting concerns over the impacts of economic and population development and discussions on the limits to growth (Meadows, Meadows, Randers and Behrens III 1972). In addition, a north/south divide became evident in the environmental debate at the time and was also mirrored in tourism discussions (Britton 1982; Turner and Ash 1975). Although these concerns regarding the limits to growth were truly global in scale, they were mainly channeled to destination-level analysis of the impacts and questions of how to define the limits of growth and prevent detrimental outcomes of development in destinations (Gössling and Hall 2005a). Rather than stating "the limits to growth" in tourism, the questions were more concerned with issues and processes limiting or affecting growth and the industry's future. The message was the same, however: a negative outcome (collapse) was not inevitable if development actors could change their policies.

At destinations, the growth and impacts of mass tourism in particular were seen to be problematic for the environment, and also for the industry's future. The negative impacts became evident fairly early in the mass destinations on the Mediterranean coast, for example. During the 80s at the latest, these changes also seemed threatening for the industry's viability and image (Robinson 1996; Wolfe 1983). In addition to the ideology of sustainable development and increased impacts, the transformation in modes of production and consumption in Western societies towards post-Fordist production supported alternative trends and resulted in a number of new forms and terms such as ecotourism (Mowforth and Munt 1998). This created markets for more individual, hybrid, "environmentally consciousness" products (Hughes 2004; Poon 1993). In the industry and its marketing, the arguments for new, alternative forms were strongly supported by the rhetoric of sustainability (Cohen 2002; Wheeller 1993; Wight 1993).

The idea of sustainability in tourism has emerged as a new paradigm. The definition of sustainable development has been described as complex, normative, imprecise, and not operational, but it is not only the obvious vagueness of the WCED's (1987) suggestion or numerous later

definitions, which create a fuzzy picture of the idea as well as the conflict of interests (Duffy 2002; Wall 1997). The concept is ideologically and politically contested, and needs to cover a broad range of interests which have no easily identifiable common denominator (Spangenberg 2005). Although the concept is problematic and has analytical weaknesses, it has provided a platform on which different stakeholders in tourism can interact, negotiate, and reflect on their actions' consequences for the environment.

### *Sustainable Tourism*

The basic ideas and principles of sustainable development have been applied to tourism, but perhaps as a result of conceptual problems, disagreements, and the multidimensionality of both concepts (Butler 1991; L     1991; Sharpley 2000), many commentators have stated that no exact definitions of sustainable tourism exist. Consequently, the notion has sometimes been understood as an ideology and point of view rather than an exact operational definition (Clarke 1997), and has been defined broadly as "tourism which is economically viable but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and the social fabric of the host community" (Swarbrooke 1999:13). Definitions like this emphasize the needs of the industry and sustainable use of its resources (Hardy, Beeton and Pearson 2002). By contrast, some researchers prefer to use the term sustainable development in tourism (Butler 1999), which involves the ethical aspects of the ideology of sustainability and does not necessarily refer to a tourism-centric approach in development discussions and practices in which the evaluation is focused on the needs of the industry (Burns 1999).

The idea of sustainable tourism has both fascinated and irritated academics and developers, and the concept in particular has aroused harsh criticism (Hunter 1997; McKercher 1993). Indeed, many interpretational and practical problems involved in the concept and in its relation to sustainable development are widely discussed in the existing literature (Butler 1999; Liu 2003; Sharpley 2000; Wall 1997). One of the key problems is tied to the holistic nature of sustainability, especially its spatial and temporal scales. Tourism is a broad system based on the movement of people, goods, capital, and ideas, among many other things, between home regions and destinations that are linked by means of routes and transit regions and associated with many other societal processes. Tourism is also increasingly becoming a part of the global economy and culture, but the focus of sustainability has nevertheless been mainly on destinations and tourism practices in those areas, grasping the most visible processes and impacts related to the industry, but only the fragment of the total (G  ssling 2000).

This limitation on sustainable tourism is not only practical in nature but also ethical (Holden 2003; Macbeth 2005). In sustainable development, the issues of scale and the global-local nexus play an important role (Duffy 2002; Milne 1998), but in sustainable tourism the focus of



analysis has been mainly on the local, destination level. As suggested by Inskeep, “the sustainable development approach can be applied to any scale of tourism development from larger resorts to limited size special interest tourism...” (1991:xviii). Thus, tourism has focused in practice on contributing to sustainable development mainly on a local scale, but notably it may also fail to maximize benefits and minimize negative local impacts (Burns 1999; Wall 1997).

In spite of the contested nature and narrow focus in practice, the political argumentation and justification of sustainable tourism are often derived implicitly or explicitly from the idea and rhetoric of sustainable development as a holistic, future-oriented, and socially equal global-scale process. This has resulted in a conceptual confusion, criticism, and a need to understand how the limits of growth could be defined and set in tourism. In a local-scale analysis many of these limits and related discussions are derived from earlier studies on carrying capacity.

### *Carrying Capacity*

Unlike sustainable tourism, the concept of carrying capacity does not rhetorically imply global or intra- and inter-generational solutions but aims to offer more time/space-specific answers at the local level. As a local scale solution, carrying capacity has a long research tradition, especially among geographers studying tourism and recreation. McMurray, for example, saw the issue of carrying capacity as one of the “contributions geography can make” in the field of recreation and tourism research (1930:19), although such issues have also been studied on a broad basis in recreation studies within the forest sciences (McCool and Lime 2001; Stankey and McCool 1984; Wagar 1964).

The concept of carrying capacity occupies a key position with regard to sustainable tourism, in that many of the latter’s principles are actually based on this theory and research tradition (Tribe, Font, Grittis, Vickery and Yale 2000:44–45). It is occasionally interpreted as an application of sustainable tourism (Butler 1999:9), implying that the two can co-exist and may both be useful concepts and frameworks for analyzing the impacts and limits of development (Butler 1996). Carrying capacity has been generally defined as the maximum number of people who can use a site without any unacceptable alteration in the physical environment and without any unacceptable decline in the quality of the experience gained by tourists (Mathieson and Wall 1982:21). However, there is not just one carrying capacity of a destination. Donald Getz (1983), for example, has divided the concept into six subtypes (physical, economic, perceptual, social, ecological, and political), each having different implications.

The issue of carrying capacity encountered some of the same problems in the past as the idea of sustainable tourism has nowadays: that of providing unrealistic expectations at times and being conceptually fragmented (McCool and Lime 2001; Wall 1982). The search for a magical absolute and objective calculation of the maximum acceptable

number of tourists at a destination has failed, for example, because carrying capacity is not related only to a certain resource and the numbers of tourists or the intensity of the factual impacts. It is also a question of human values and (changing) perceptions concerning the resource, indicators, criteria, and impacts (Hughes and Furley 1996; Lindberg, McCool and Stankey 1997; Odell 1975). There are probably as many definitions of carrying capacity in the literature as there are definitions of sustainable tourism, based on different perspectives and opinions concerning nature and culture and their use as resources.

## TRADITIONS OF THE LIMITS OF GROWTH

Even though there are (or should be) differences between the ideas of sustainable tourism and carrying capacity, such as the spatial scale of evaluation and the role of ethics and ideology, there seem to be many similarities, too. The idea of sustainable tourism involves the recognition of negative impacts and the need to manage them in order to achieve the goals of sustainable development. Carrying capacity has been one of the central frameworks within which such issues can be considered in a local scale (Lindberg et al 1997:461). One common and key issue is the idea of the limits of touristic use and the changes in the physical and social environment to be deemed acceptable (Butler 1996, 1999).

Both sustainability and carrying capacity refer to the scale of tourism activity that can occur in a spatial unit without doing any serious harm to the natural, economic, and sociocultural elements at destinations. For practical reasons of clarity, the following background to the main traditions of the limits to growth in tourism refers consistently to sustainable tourism or sustainability in tourism unless the specific discussion is solely linked to carrying capacity issues.

### *The Resource-Based Tradition*

The earliest discussions on the limits of growth in tourism were related to the carrying capacity model and a search for the magical number, which cannot be overstepped without serious negative impacts on the resources available. This perspective can be termed a resource-based tradition of sustainable tourism. Historically, it is related especially to recreation studies in natural or semi-natural settings (Lucas 1964; Stankey 1982), the basic assumptions being derived from late 19th century livestock and wildlife management studies (Pigram and Jenkins 1999:90). The roots of the research tradition are deeply grounded in positivism and the natural sciences.

In livestock studies, Dasman (1945, quoted by Wall 1982:190) defined carrying capacity as the maximum number of grazing animals of a given class that could be maintained on a grazing range without damage to the stock or resource used in grazing. Thus, the resource-based idea implies an objective and measurable limit or stage of growth

at which there is no room for any more individuals in a certain environment. Tourism causes impacts, but in order to achieve further growth and development, individuals and actors will have to cope with the environment in a new and better way, such as by altering their behavior or number but not primarily the resource that is used. In recreation and tourism studies this has led to density, erosion, disturbance, crowding, social carrying capacity, and authenticity analyses (Anderson and Brown 1984; Aronsson 1994; Vaske, Shelby, Graefe and Heberlein 1986).

In the resource-based tradition, the limits to the growth and impacts are evaluated in relation to the resources used in tourism and the assumed or known natural or original (non-tourism) conditions (Buckley 1999, 2003). Ontologically, the limits of growth are objective and measurable in nature in terms of the original characteristics of the resources, that is, what the space used for tourism would be without such activities. The subject of the evaluation is the resource (physical and/or social environment) and its condition. Epistemologically, the limits of growth are defined by comparing the condition of the resources used with that of a similar space (potential resources) not used in activities, or by describing and evaluating the intensity of the physical, social, or cultural changes resulting from tourism (Hammit and Cole 1987; Taylor 2001). Thus, the indicators of resource-based sustainability reflect the relation between the condition of the resources (objects) and the impacts of development. The challenges are how to define the original non-tourism conditions of the resources and separate the impacts of the industry from changes caused by other activities and natural or human-induced processes at destinations (Collins 1998). In addition, tourism always causes some impacts, which leads to the critical question of which impacts are objectively acceptable and to what degree.

In another context, McKercher (1993) has made a distinction between the ecological and development perspectives of sustainability in tourism. The resource-based tradition refers to the former, but there is more than just an ecological imperative or ideology behind the definition. It is important to consider the ecological elements (natural capital) of sustainability, but as stated by Craik (1995) and Butler (1999), it has too often been reduced to purely environmental matters. The notion of resource-based sustainability is grounded in the idea of a non-touristic, static space, the ecological, and also social, cultural, political, and economic, changes which can be compared and evaluated based on the concept of this spatial unit as an original or authentic resource for tourism.

### *The Activity-Based Tradition*

Tourism is a dynamic activity in which change is said to be a permanent state, and it is for this reason that the resource-based idea appears to be problematic for the industry and its development models. Tourism and its changes produce impacts and, because of the broad range



of interests, some are perceived as negative. The previously mentioned development perspective of sustainability put forward by [McKercher \(1993\)](#) aims to overcome the problem by emphasizing the needs and active role of the industry in defining sustainability. Related to this, the World Tourism Organization ([WTO 1993](#)) and many other international, national, or regional organizations have actively defined the idea of sustainability and its dimensions.

Development and industry-oriented solutions for sustainable tourism can be assigned to an activity-based tradition of sustainability, implying that certain tourist activities, or the industry itself, may have a limit of growth and a maximum capacity ([Wall 1982](#)). Unlike the case of resource-based sustainability, individuals and human activities in tourism do not necessarily alter their behavior in the first instance in their relation to the resources used in tourism. In order to grow and develop, the industry and other related actors will modify the environment, the resources, for their needs.

The activity-based tradition is more industrially oriented than the resource-based tradition. It refers to tourism-centric approaches in development discussions, focusing more on the needs of tourism as an economic activity. In research it originates from ideas similar to the notion of product lifecycle, for example, which has been adopted from marketing and carrying capacity studies ([Day 1981](#); [Stansfield 1978](#)). The well-known tourism area cycle of evolution proposed by [Butler \(1980\)](#) describes the change process of a destination from the early exploration and involvement stages through the development and consolidation stages, and finally to the stagnation stage. According to Butler, every tourism area has a limit to its growth and the stagnated situation implies that this limit has been reached. The element that limits growth, referred to in the model as carrying capacity, is depicted as a relatively static zone that controls the scale of development in a specific environment.

The interrelationship between lifecycle (representing tourism growth) and carrying capacity is nevertheless a dynamic one ([Butler 1997:116](#); [Martin and Uysal 1990](#)). Although, unlimited growth at any destination is impossible, development may be cyclical in nature ([Baum 1998](#); [Butler 2004](#)): during the final stagnation stage of the evolution model, or even before if new major products or marketing schemes have been introduced, the cycle can begin again, exhibit new (absolute) growth, or else a decline can set in ([Tooman 1997](#)). These potential multiple and constantly rising cycles in the evolution model may challenge the role of carrying capacity and its connection with the resources used in tourism during the changing cycles. Thus, the limit of growth in the evolution model is not primarily based on the capacity of the destination and its ("original") resources for absorbing tourism, but on the industry (activity) and its capacity. By changing the tourism product (destination) through development and marketing, and by introducing new types of facilities and infrastructure, etc., the destination and its limits of growth can be modified and moved forward to a new, higher level.

All touristic modifications based on the development of new cycles will potentially require more effective and massive environmental

changes, new land-use patterns and additional construction work, all of which can quite easily overstep some of the limits of resource-based (such as ecologically, socially, and culturally defined) sustainability. Butler (1992) has argued that alternative tourism, for example, represents the thin edge of the wedge and will eventually lead to massive and unsustainable changes. This possible transformation from a small-scale tourism place to a mass destination may be processed through two or more cycles and levels and elements of carrying capacity in the evolution model.

The activity-based tradition involves a relativist approach. It implies that certain tourism activities have or may have different kinds of limits on their growth, or that certain industry segments have different abilities to cope with impacts and other tourists. Instead of the original resource utilized (as in the exploration, involvement, and early development stages), the limits of growth are ontologically based on specific changing activities, capacities, or products. The subject of evaluation is tourism and its capacity for growth. From an epistemological perspective, the non-growth situation implies that the limit, in terms of carrying capacity and sustainability, may be reached and modifications are needed in tourism activities and products in order to further development. As such, the indicators of activity-based sustainability reflect the relation between activities (the nature of the tourism industry) and development (the intensity of the industry). Activity-based sustainability is grounded in the idea of a dynamic, transforming tourism space, the limits on whose growth are evaluated based on the activities and their shifting needs and capacities for utilizing resources in tourism.

#### *The Community-Based Tradition*

The relation between resource-based and activity-based sustainability appears to be problematic. As tourism grows, indicating that the limits of activity-based sustainability have not yet been reached, development actions may, and often do, overstep the resource-based capacity to change. Efforts have been made in the literature to overcome this dual nature of sustainability by invoking different negotiation and participation processes. It is obviously impossible to “involve” the physical or intangible resources of destination regions directly in participation processes, but certain stakeholders and groups, such as conservationists and local heritage societies, may represent those interests (Selin 1999).

In the literature such participation processes refer broadly to community approaches (Murphy 1983, 1988; Timothy and White 1999). Thus, the setting of limits of growth through negotiations and participation can be termed a community-based tradition of sustainable tourism, in which the host and the benefits that it may gain from tourism are in a central position in the process (Robinson and Hall 2000; Scheyvens 1999). Participatory approaches have evolved towards new kinds of such processes which include justice, social, and pro-poor tourism, all aiming at practices that contribute to the local bases and

especially to the needs of marginalized people (Duffy 2002:100–102; Hall 1994:43–45).

Community-based sustainability nevertheless does not automatically lead to a situation where members of host destinations actually reach an equal (or higher) position relative to other actors or the industry in the planning and development processes (Akama 1996:573), and “community” refers both to hosts and to other groups and actors involved in tourism (Getz and Timor 2005; Selin 1999). It is also important to note that the host community is not usually monolithic but rather consists of different groups with different preferences with regard to tourism and its limits of growth (Lew 1989). These different groups are not necessarily equally represented or involved in participatory processes (Kieti and Akama 2005). All this makes the participatory approach a challenging issue in the context of sustainable tourism.

The community-based tradition implies that sustainability is or can be defined through a negotiation process, which indicates that the limits of growth are socially constructed (Bryant and Wilson 1998; Hughes 1995; Redcliffe and Woodgate 1997). As a social construct, sustainability refers to the maximum levels of the known or perceived impacts of tourism that are permissible in a certain time-space context before the negative impacts are considered to be too disturbing from the perspectives of specific social, cultural, political, or economic actors who possess sufficient power over the chosen indicators and criteria. The community-based tradition aims to empower the hosts in development discourses and practices, but in the end the constructive perspective indicates that the limits of tourism are associated ontologically with power relations in a certain context. By empowering the communities, however, the limits of growth in tourism can be defined in a more equal way and one that is more beneficial for the local people (Scheyvens 2002).

In the noted tradition, sustainable tourism and the limits of growth are understood as dynamic and contested ideas which are continually being constructed and reconstructed during the process of development and negotiations. The conceptualization of tourism spaces and their sustainability as social constructs does not necessarily undervalue resource-based capacity and the realm of nature or ecological changes and their character in any objective or measurable sense. Impacts do exist in the physical world (in spite of human values, meanings, and preferences) and tourism may factually change ecosystems and indigenous cultures, destroy habitats, and disturb wildlife. But in the world of meanings and social forces, the question of whether these changes are acceptable or unacceptable depends on the perspective, the touristic discourses, and one’s specific (societal) values, attitudes, knowledge, and priorities concerning the role and impacts (Proctor 1998). Within these conditions a community-based approach aims to recognize the need to promote both people’s quality of life and the protection of resources (Scheyvens 1999:246).

The community-based tradition indicates that the concept of sustainable tourism is not objective, related to knowledge, and laden with power issues. Epistemologically, the determination of the limits of

growth is associated with power relations constituted by different actors and discourses on capacity, which together define the appropriate level of use. For example, such questions as who can define and decide what is an ecologically acceptable change, or what resources should be sustained and for whom, or what is sustainable development for local cultures and economies, are all loaded with power issues. In most cases the answers to these issues are not derived directly from the impacts themselves but from the social, economic, and political practices and discourses of the power relations defining them.

From the perspective of the tradition, there is a growing need for research into the politics of tourism (Bianchi 2004; Hall 1994), which has been somewhat ignored as an issue in previous studies, in order to define what are its desired goals and conditions, its resources and limits, and how power issues and decisionmaking processes are established and perceived in the local-global nexus. In addition, a community-based approach to development should address the elements of education, training, and capacity building, as is strongly indicated in pro-poor tourism discussions, for example. There is also an urgent need to re-evaluate the perspectives from which the industry and its sustainability are perceived and redefine the position of tourism and scale of analysis in sustainable development discourses.

## CONCLUSION

The idea and definition of sustainability are major challenges for tourism studies and the industry. The three traditions identified here represent different aspects and elements of the idea of sustainability on a local scale. The resource-based tradition reflects the limits of the natural or original conditions of the related resources and the needs to protect nature (natural capital) and the local culture (cultural capital) from unacceptable changes caused by tourism activities. The activity-based tradition refers to the resource needs of the industry with respect to its present and future development, aiming to sustain the economic capital invested in tourism. The community-based tradition stresses the wider involvement and empowerment of various actors, especially host communities, in development by emphasizing the elements of social capital in a local context. All these perspectives have their advantages, but also limitations and different outcomes if utilized in (sustainable) tourism processes.

The resource-based tradition reflects discussions concerning the limits to growth and the existence of a certain limit that cannot be overstepped or negotiated. In tourism discussions it has been grounded in a theoretically thin surface of carrying capacity studies focusing on local-scale processes. Although the resource-based tradition does not necessarily mean that developmental impacts are excluded, it may still be too restrictive a foundation on which to define the limits of growth for a form of sustainable tourism that would also be economically viable. As stated by Cater, “true sustainability includes the human dimension,” which means the use of natural capital in tourism activities



and often major changes in the environment (1993:89). Because of the limited focus of resource-based carrying capacity, McCool and Lime have even suggested that “it is now time to bury the concept of numerical tourism and recreation carrying capacity” (2001:385).

In contrast, the activity-based tradition demonstrates the present and relatively widely accepted hegemonic idea of sustainability. It reflects the idea that tourism as (a tool for) development can contribute to sustainability, but it also strongly represents the industry’s perspective, from which growth and its needs are conditions for justifying sustainability: the objective and driving force is to sustain tourism and its resource base for the future needs of the industry. In this respect the environment and local communities and cultures are the resources, and as critically noted by Mowforth and Munt, this current emphasis on sustainable tourism may represent the mainstream industry’s attempt to invent a new legitimization for itself: “‘sustainable’ and ‘rational’ use of the environment, including the preservation of nature as an amenity for the already advantaged” (1998:96). The question of whether there should be tourism or not is an impossible or irrelevant one in the present context, given the current management of (activity-based) sustainability. Instead, the issue is what kind of tourism there can be for development to take place, and how much: the position (existence) of the industry is taken for granted. As a result, it has not been easy to transpose the principles of sustainable development onto tourism as a specific economic and social activity (Sharpley 2000; Wall 1993).

### *Repositioning Sustainable Development Discourses*

Previous notions become especially problematic if all tourism can be regarded as sustainable by appealing to certain guidelines and codes of conduct (Clarke 1997). Tourism is often said to be the world’s largest industry. In practice, however, it comes after the international arms trade in terms of its economic position and is probably on a par with drug and human trafficking, including prostitution (SIPRI Yearbook 2004; United Nations 2005). These branches of the economy could scarcely be linked to the idea of sustainability. In the context of sustainable development and its basic goals and principles, however, it may be equally misleading to combine the term firmly with tourism as a specific sector of the economy (and what would be the conditions and code of conduct for sustainable sex tourism, for example?). It is important to note that tourism is like any other industry, in that it can truly make a positive contribution to the environment and to communities but it can also be a negative element with respect to them. As indicated by Gössling and Hall, “tourism cannot claim to have any moral high ground” (2005b:305).

Sustainability should primarily be connected with the needs of people—not a certain industry—and the use of natural and cultural resources in a way that will also safeguard human needs in the future (Redcliffe 1987; Spangenberg 2005; WCED 1987). Naturally, the needs of people and those of a certain industry are not necessarily conflict-



ing, and tourism is often beneficial for the development of its destination regions, but that alone does not make it sustainable. As noted by [Butler \(1999\)](#), tourism may not always be the most favorable or wisest use of natural or cultural amenities and resources in specific locations in the long term, and “sustainable tourism” may in practice be an unsustainable and unequal process for the original communities or natural habitats ([Bianchi 2004](#); [Cohen 2002](#); [Wall 1997](#)).

The important question is on what conditions sustainable tourism could represent sustainable development locally and also in a local-global nexus. Are the present local solutions to global challenges enough, and do they represent all that tourism can do? There are no single or simple answers to these questions. Basically, in order to practice truly sustainable tourism based on the idea of sustainable development, the position of the industry should perhaps be re-evaluated and re-located in the current development discourses and actions. The community-based tradition aims to promote this decentralization, with an emphasis on powerful integration into surrounding social and spatial structures and their goals. Community-based tradition is connected to the idea that tourism can contribute to a better social, economic, and environmental future in a local scale by stressing the needs of local people. From the sustainable development perspective, the sustainable use of resources and the environment and the well-being of communities are goals to which sustainable tourism could and should contribute—if the industry’s role is also seen to be beneficial to that process by groups other than the industry itself. Without that emphasis, the current mode and goals of sustainable tourism “do not necessarily contribute to those of sustainable development” ([Hunter 1997:851](#)).

However, local communities do not have automatic privileges over the ethical or sustainable aspects of tourism, nor do they necessarily have any intrinsic knowledge of the impacts and the scale of these impacts on the environment. The community-based approach, like other traditions of sustainability, is currently challenged by globalization and global environmental ethics ([Holden 2003](#)). The latter questions the anthropocentric position, which is built on the idea of sustainability, by emphasizing the rights of nature as equal to those of humans. Thus, these two perspectives—sustainability and environmental ethics—do not easily coincide ([Duffy 2002](#); [Macbeth 2005](#)), but they are both closely connected with current issues in globalization. Locally tourism often represents the processes of globalization for good and bad. In the context of global ethics, globalization may encourage people and political actors in distant places to act in more responsible and egalitarian ways, but its local outcomes are usually seen rather differently ([Saarinen 2004](#)). Indeed, the consequences of ever-deeper interconnectedness and dependence between distant places and people may be local non-connectedness and non-dependence within increasingly tourism-dependent communities, leading to uneven practices of development in the global-local nexus ([Britton 1991](#); [Milne 1998](#)).

In the context of globalization, the relations between sustainable development, tourism, and localities are complex. It is evident that the discourses regarding the appropriate limits of growth are not only

an issue for local-scale discussions but also for global ones. Processes defined non-locally, such as sustainable development, are increasingly coming to determine local realities and practices, but as noted by [Teo \(2002\)](#), such processes that allude to globalization are not solely driven from “out there”, as local people and actors also contribute to them and their local outcomes. In this kind of “globalization from below”, different social groups define and contest the appropriate goals, methods, and levels for the use of natural and cultural resources and different conceptualizations of nature and culture through negotiations ([Macnaghten and Urry 1998:29–31](#); [Teo and Lim 2003](#); [Wall 1996](#)). In this local–global nexus, the intensity of the elements of social capital (networks, norms, and trust) in communities affects the possibilities of the local people to control or influence the place-specific outcomes of globalization and the limits of growth in tourism ([Jones 2005](#)).

To conclude, it is important to realize that sustainability is not a one-way street in the global–local nexus. In the context of sustainable development, the limits of growth cannot be established and grounded solely on local or global perspectives. Sustainability is a matter of both local and global responsibilities. In this respect globalization challenges many aspects of the traditions of sustainability introduced into tourism and urges different political and economic actors to place a much stronger emphasis on human relations and ethics in the global–local nexus. Instead of local-scale, tourism-centric approaches, tourism as an activity needs to be decentralized in discourses and practices referring to sustainable development. Without this, sustainable tourism may become (or remain) almost meaningless jargon and a framework that can be used for multiple purposes, including political, economic, cultural, or environmental, without any real reference to the holistic and ethical idea of sustainability ([Hall and Lew 1998:200](#); [Wheeller 1993](#)).

In this context, the mission and value of academic studies concerning the limits of growth may be seen to lie in evaluating and providing perspectives on the sustainable and ethical use of nature and culture in both global and local development processes. Since the ethical element in sustainability is built upon both theory and practice, and on both local and global scales, the industry will eventually have to change and redirect its position in planning discourses and conventions if it really aims to promote sustainable development and truly become an activity which “meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future” as outlined by the [World Tourism Organization \(1993:7\)](#). **A**

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