Enabling sustainable visits. Introduction

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To visit and be visited

Visits and visiting are imperative. Cultures and societies have evolved from, and rest on, the laurels of human encounters. Human history teaches us convincingly that who we are today has developed through our ability to move and meet. However – no matter how much the visits and meetings are imperative – the ever-increasing number of people on the move round the world now challenge the social, cultural, and ecological systems of whole societies and, ultimately, the entire global ecosystem's sustainability.

One example of the challenges that many destinations are now facing is Gotland, Sweden's largest island, in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Here, as in most of the Baltic region as a whole, tourism has increased rapidly during the past decades[1]. In an islanded and marginalised region such as Gotland, visitors come with a number of positive effects for economy, jobs, welfare, and more. At the same time, as for a large number of destinations all over the world – not least islands – the ever-increasing number of visitors also poses serious challenges. With more visitors come increased risks for the permanent residents, their environment and cultural heritage. With less or no visitors, the visited risk stagnation or depletion of local culture and society. Therefore, a challenge that many destinations are facing is to develop visits and a tourism industry infrastructure

1 The number of guest nights per inhabitant in Gotland (2019) was 16.25, which can be compared to Stockholm with 6.42 and Sweden's average of 6.52. (Tillväxtverket, 2023-01-27)

that is sustainable in terms of technology, economy, society, culture, and ecology. The challenge this book addresses is how to enable the transition to a more sustainable development in the tourism industry and thereby enable sustainable visits.

Enabling sustainable visits – a grand challenge

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries. Since the 1950s, the growth of the tourism industry has been explosive, to say the least.

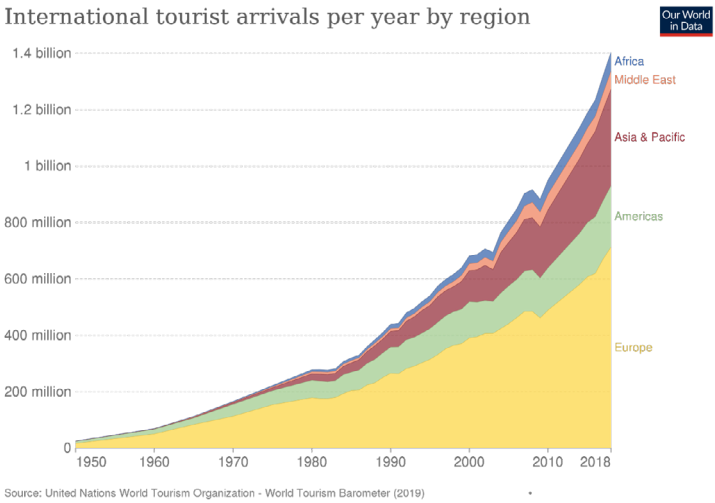

Figure 1: The global development of international tourist arrivals. Licensed under CC. Image source: Our World in Data: https://ourworldindata.org/tourism.

As illustrated in the figure, an increase from tens of millions of international tourists in 1950, to 1.4 billion in 2018, is indeed a dramatic development. Still, this is just a small breeze compared to the increase of domestic tourists, especially in Europe, America, and parts of Asia. The variation is of course great: in Sweden 2018 there were four times more domestic than international tourists, in Canada nine, the US 14, and in China 43 times more domestic tourists,

which counts to around 5.5 billion.[2] Taken together, all these tourists make up a mighty flood of people on the move.

The growth in tourism came to a dramatic turn with the pandemic outbreak in 2019, which has considerably affected the development of tourism. This is evident in the GDP statistics. Before the pandemic, tourism on average contributed 4.4% of the GDP and 6.9% of employment, and constituted more than 20% of service-related exports of OECD countries.[3] During the pandemic, these figures were halved. Although tourism has been bouncing back at an increasing rate, the industry is now facing new challenges due to growing geopolitical uncertainties and conflicts worldwide, such as the Russian military invasion of Ukraine and the risk of armed conflicts between several countries in the South China Sea. The growing unpredictability of tourist flows poses new challenges for destinations to balance between the risk of over-tourism and the risk of stagnation or depletion of local culture and society.

What Figure 1 also indicates is that since the 1950s tourism has become an integral part of the lifestyles in a large part of the world. Tourism is not just about going somewhere and seeing something, it is a potent game-changer that turns places, heritages, and culture into destinations (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). Tourism researcher Dean MacCannell (2013) argues that 'the tourist' is a powerful, widespread model for modern mankind and a major consensus and stabilising force in Western society. The effect is, as Culler (1981, p. 9) already noted 40 years ago, that 'one might be uncertain as to what people ought to think about capital punishment but one knows what they ought to see in Paris'. Even if people are aware of some of tourism's negative consequences on society, culture, and nature, it may in the end be too dear, important, and meaningful to them to just discard the whole idea and stay at home (Grinell, 2004).

2 UNWTO: Compendium of Tourism Statistics. Data 2014-2018. The number of guest nights in Sweden was 67.8 million, of which the Swedes themselves spent just over 70%. Canada registered 31 million inbound arrivals, and 278 million domestic tourists, the US 169 million international and 2.3 billion domestic tourists, and China 128 million foreign tourists, and 5.5 billion domestic tourists.

3 OECD (2022). *OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2022*. OECD Publishing, Paris.

But – staying at home is most likely what many or most of us will have to consider in the near future, if we are to honour the Paris climate accords (2015) and the agreements of the Glasgow Climate Pact (2021). The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) states that global greenhouse gas emissions will have to fall by 7.6% each year up to 2030.[4] By 2030, we must produce below an average of four tons of CO_2 per person in order to reduce our ecological footprints and the risk of irreversible climate changes that may threaten the world's habitability.[5] By 2045, each of us must not emit more than one ton of greenhouse gases, in order not to exceed the amount of emissions the planet can absorb.[6] Even if that happens, the world will still not be close to sustainability.

Tourism is of course only one of many causes of increasing greenhouse gas emissions, neither the biggest nor the most important, and CO_2 is just one of many greenhouse gases, some of which are considerably more potent. Still, according to Climate Watch, in 2020 the US and Canada emitted around 15 metric tons of CO_2 per person, Germany 7.9, France 4, and Sweden 3.4.[7] When the annual CO_2 budget for each and every one on planet Earth in only 20 years' time will have to be just one ton, and when this sole ton equals a single round trip from London to New York by air,[8] then it will inevitably have severe consequences for the kind of tourism that the Western world has become accustomed to over the last half century.

4 https://unfccc.int/news/cut-global-emissions-by-76-percent-every-year-for-next-decade-to-meet-15degc-paris-target-un-report

5 See Wackernagel, Beyers & Rout (2019); https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/ecological-footprint; https://www.footprintcalculator.org.

6 Ministry of the Environment and Energy: The Swedish climate policy framework: https://www.government.se/495f60/contentassets/883ae8e123bc4e42aa8d59296ebe0478/the-swedish-climate-policy-framework.pdf

7 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC?locations=-US-SE-CA. When also emissions from consumption of public services are included, the figures are substantially higher; for Swedes about 9 ton per person and year.

8 According to the CO_2 calculator at https://klimatsmartsemester.se it would take an acre of forest a year to absorb the same amount of CO_2 emissions of a one-way flight from London to New York. That is about the same amount of emissions that the average person in Zimbabwe generates over an entire year. https://sustainabletravel.org/issues/carbon-footprint-tourism/

Echoing a long line of researchers and activists since the 1970s, it seems safe to conclude that this will change everything, in ways we can yet only vaguely imagine.[9] All of us will have to ask ourselves time and again what footprints we can afford, ecologically, socially, and culturally. CO_2 emissions and possible upcoming climate changes are but one part of the challenges. Other pertinent issues around tourism range from overcrowding ('people pollution'), waste, food and water consumption, overheating of economies and gentrification, to marginalisation, othering, and alienation. In some places, tourism in effect threatens to wear down the local cultures and heritages it thrives on, affect the social contracts that regulate the relations to others and to nature, and contaminate the very fabric of life. Given the tight connection between destination production and marketing, place branding and tourism in today's world, we will have to ask ourselves to what extent tourism is part of the solution or of the problem. What room is there for tourism as we know it? Are sustainable visits possible and how can such visits be enabled?

Towards sustainable visits – defining a concept

Any research is dependent on a language that does not predetermine what can and cannot be said (cf. Kirshenblatt Gimblett, 1992, p. 52). For our purposes 'tourism' and 'tourist' are terms that come not only with too many accumulated meanings but also, and more importantly, with a prominent capacity to produce what they name: a ritualised series of comings and goings framed by a number of given positions, perspectives, and understandings.

According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), a tourist is any person who travels to a destination away from their residence, and stays there for at least 24 hours for personal or business/professional purposes.[10] This is a very broad definition, to say the least. And it is by applying this now commonly used and almost all-inclusive definition that it has become possible to come up with the fantastic figures of arrivals, guest nights, financial flows and revenues that support the image of tourism as one of the world's largest

9 See for example Fuller 1969; Meadows, Randers & Behrens 1972; Schumacher 1973, Klein 2014.

10 https://www.unwto.org/glossary-tourism-terms

and most important industries, which in turn is used to legitimise the idea that for marginalised places, like Gotland, tourism is the saviour, by providing the only road to a viable future.

If one problem with 'tourism' is the broad and all-inclusive definitions of 'tourists', another is a well-established and effective disregard for other kinds of people on the move. In an overview of global mobility, the geographer Ronald Skeldon (2018) criticises the tendency to consider international migration separately from other forms of mobility and argues that human mobility 'is best conceived as a system that integrates internal and international migration within a single framework' together with 'mass mobility in the form of tourism' (Skeldon, 2018, p. 7). What tourism statistics tend to disclose is precisely how tourism is closely linked to, and overlapping with, other circular forms of mobility and population movements, not least internal and international migration.

Whilst some arrive comfortably by air, bus, or on board large exclusive cruise liners, others arrive as refugees by foot, or in overfilled trucks and rubber dinghies, seeking a better future elsewhere, or fleeing from war, oppression, and poverty. Together, all of these form a steady and massive stream of people constantly in motion, billions of people that feed the world's economies, but also consume increasing parts of its physical, social, and cultural resources. Tourism therefore needs to be built into the global framework of migration, and particularly into the debates on migration and development and on policies to manage migration:

> Tourism is embedded in a complex matrix of other forms of human movement, thus making it difficult for policy makers. Migration policy, complicated enough as it is, cannot be separated from policies that contribute to the emergence of other forms of human movement and the interrelationships need to be appreciated if effective approaches are to be introduced to "manage migration". (Skeldon 2018, p. 7)

Skeldon's main point is simply that the 'idea that most people do not move or are fixed at a specific location might be appealing but is wrong. Mobility is an inherent characteristic of all populations unless specific policies or other factors are in place that limit or control that mobility' (Skeldon 2018, p. 4).

For our purposes it has been necessary to distance ourselves from established tourism discourse and instead introduce terms and

notions that would let us discuss tourism and destinations from local perspectives. Taking such considerations into account, 'sustainable visits' seemed as a notion that would let us consider both local, emic perspectives and global sustainability issues.

The core of 'sustainable visits' is the roles and positions of the visited and the visitor. In English, 'visit' (derived from Latin *videre*, to see, notice, or observe) is to 'come to a person to comfort or benefit', 'friendly or formally call upon someone', or a 'short or temporary trip to some place'.[11] In Swedish 'to visit' is *besöka* (cf. English 'beseech', 'beseek' and Scots *beseik*), but 'visit' has also been in use since the 19th century, for shorter stays and, more generally, for more or less ceremonial courtesy visit prescribed by convention, e.g., to initiate contact with a family, in response to an invitation. Thus, in both languages, 'visit' entails a certain kind of stay and a certain kind of relation between two parties, the visited host and the visiting guest. In the research programme, it is these connotations that we wanted to build on. Guest-host relationships are among humanity's most widespread and cherished, next to husband-wife, parent-child, sibling, family, relative, and some others. Throughout millennia, such relations have made a core upon which human civilisations around the world have been founded. Guest-host relations are generally based on mutual politeness, courtesy, recognition, and respect, involve ceremonial gift exchanges, and entail a certain amount of reciprocity. You are expected to pay a visit back, and to return gifts. 'Visit' is also a broader concept that entails tourism but includes other visits. Going back to the UNWTO's definition of tourism,[12] we find visits as more encompassing than tourism:

> Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure. (UNWTO, 2023)

11 https://www.etymonline.com/word/visit; https://www.saob.se/artikel/?unik=B_1729 -0135.l8Q2

12 https://www.unwto.org/glossary-tourism-terms

In this sense, 'a visit' and 'to visit' imply, or even require, face-to-face encounters between the two parties. In many places, and certainly in Gotland, there is a whole repertoire of emic terms for travellers and temporary guests, based precisely on how they relate to, and engage and interact with the local community: family, relatives, and friends; students, conference guests, business people, mainlanders, tourists. While some of these visitors activate a set of reciprocal guest-host relations and therefore are not commonly recognised as tourists, others activate formal transactions that position the locals as an anonymous, faceless 'mass-host' ready to meet the demands of the visitors, and the visitors as an equally anonymous, faceless mass of tourists of a few stereotyped types, for which the emic terms in Gotland typically entail a distanced position in relation to the visitor: bus tour and cruise ship tourists, 'party people', 'pleasure seekers', 'walking wallets', 'Medievalists' (taking part in an annual Medieval festival week), 'heritage tourists', 'summer Gotlanders', '08-ers' (the trunk code of the Stockholm area) or simply 'ignorant mainlanders'.

All these different terms denote roles or positions that involve processes of negotiations on inclusion and exclusion, and an interpretive dialogue on the relation between the parties involved and on their relation to the place. Through the negotiations, and to what extent the interaction builds on dialogue, respect, and reciprocity between the visitors and the visited, the local place can become related to in many different ways, such as a home, a workplace, or a destination.

A set of relations

Throughout the research programme and in this book, we have taken off from the idea of 'sustainable visits' as a set of relations between people, and between people and places. In Figure 2, some of the fundamental relations involved are illustrated:

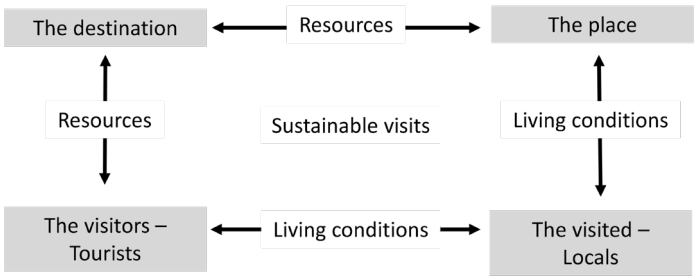

Figure 2: Fundamental relations for enabling sustainable visits.

The place is where *the visited hosts* live their everyday lives and by doing that they may also be regarded as *locals*. The relation between *locals* and the *place* is, to a large extent, defined by the living conditions. These conditions can be physical and tangible, such as seasonal variations, wind, temperature, or access to decent and affordable housing. There are also intangible conditions, such as common history (e.g., generations of ancestors that have lived there before oneself) and cultural experience (e.g., local traditions). For the individual, the experience of the relation to the place is often of fundamental importance for how the quality of life is perceived.

From the perspective of the visitor, *the place* can be experienced as a *destination*. People may come to and take part of a *place* for a multitude of reasons, as will be described in several chapters in the book. When *visitors* come as tourists, the *place* transforms into a *destination*. Visitors' relations to *the destination* are not primarily based on the living conditions, but on images, stories that are available beforehand, and on carefully selected artifacts, symbols, and *resources* provided at *the place*. Just as in the case of living conditions, these resources can be tangible (water, food, buildings etcetera) or intangible (nature sceneries, past and present stories of the place).

At *a destination,* certain types of visitors come as *tourists*, thereby invoking a typified, derived version of the guest-host relation. In this relation there are expectations on *the visited locals* to act as hosts and provide *the tourists* with the *resources* needed to fulfil their expectation of *the place*, but without considering how *the living conditions* are influenced.

In the following chapters of this book, we give many examples of unbalance in the relations between *the place*, *the destination*, *the*

visitor, and *the visited*. For example, it is often taken for granted that if we use resources to create *the destination*, the *living conditions* for *the locals* will automatically be improved. As is shown, there are many cases when this has been proven wrong. In well-known tourist hotspots, such as Tenerife, Mallorca, Venice, or Barcelona, the efforts to create a destination and the resources necessary to uphold the expectations of the place as a destination, have made the living conditions harder for the locals. Affordable housing is nowhere to be found and the service enabling a decent everyday life (grocery stores, schools, hospitals etcetera) is less prioritised. Such places risk a transformation from local *place* to a reproduced image of itself as a *destination*.

To us, 'sustainable visit' is a searchlight for other ways of visiting, ways that consider the balance between the factors and the relations in Figure 2. Such a balancing will have to consider both the visitors and the visited, the place and the destination, as well as the use of and the preservation of resources. In this book we approach these factors and relations in broad terms, and with the enabling of sustainable visits as the core of the contributions.

The starting point for the book

The aim of the book is, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, to contribute to the conversations around enabling sustainable visits – for practitioners, researchers, students, and anyone interested. The idea was formulated in 2014 at Uppsala University Campus Gotland, in Visby, Sweden. Thirty researchers from 13 disciplines came together in the multi-disciplinary long-term research programme, Sustainable Visits, focusing on the relation between destination production, local life and sustainability, and building on 'sustainable visits' so as to envision a tourism with minimal ecological, social, and cultural footprints.[13]

13 See https://www.campusgotland.uu.se/sustainvisits/

Using Gotland, the well-known tourist destination in the Baltic Sea, as a point of departure,[14] the aim of the programme was to explore sustainable visits from local, regional, national and global perspectives, and to contribute to the development and establishment of sustainable perspectives in the tourism and hospitality industry. To enrich the programme, national and international researchers were invited to participate. In close connection with the research programme, a multi-disciplinary, two-year master's programme, Sustainable Destination Development, with students from all over the world, was initiated at Campus Gotland, Uppsala University, in 2016.

In 2020, a number of the researchers involved in the Sustainable Visits programme decided to assemble an anthology of texts on enabling sustainable visits. In the following years, themes and arguments were discussed, and drafts were reviewed and revised over a series of academic workshops. The chapters that follow are the result.

In the light of increasing sustainability issues affecting all aspects of life on planet Earth, and the problems inflicted by booming tourism, this anthology addresses how tourism, culture, economy, businesses, and more can contribute to sustainable visits, and how we as researchers can contribute to enabling destinations, visitors and the visited locals to become active agents in the transition to sustainability in society at large while allowing for new visits.

The content of the book

Through 10 chapters, experienced researchers from different disciplines and universities discuss empirical studies of *visits* in the broad sense. The book is divided into three sections.

14 Gotland is Sweden's largest island. Its area is 3,140 km² (0.8 per cent of Sweden's area) and its coastline is about 800 km. Around 60,000 people live and work on Gotland all year round, of whom around 25,000 live in the city of Visby. The island has been habituated since the Stone Age (around 10,000 years ago) and has a rich cultural heritage, seen in, amongst others, the Visby city wall and the 92 medieval churches, built between the 12th and 15th centuries (Uppsala University, 2023).

In part I – **Place**, Griggio & Ronström illustrate in Chapter 2 how the location of the Medieval Week festival taking place on the island of Gotland moved from a geographical place into an online space, as it transitioned into a digital event, due to the restrictions under the COVID-19 pandemic. In their chapter, Griggio & Ronström highlight how digitalisation of events can create new social spaces and be an alternative way to achieve sustainable visits.

In Chapter 3, Farsari & Elbe continue the discussion of what a place is as they analyse how deviating perspectives on sustainable visits are drawn upon by opponents and proponents in relation to the construction of a new airport. They raise a critical voice and question whether growth is the way forward for sustainable tourism.

In part II – **Destination** and the **Visitor,** the focus shifts to how places are socially constructed to become destinations. Who is represented and who is excluded in the construction of a destination is the question raised by Lönnroth & Ronström in Chapter 4, as they discuss how a place is promoted in tourist brochures.

In Chapter 5, Nordvall illustrates how visitors tend to reproduce stereotypical images of a destination, and discusses the role that such reproduction plays in the social construction of a destination, and in the end for the possibilities of attaining sustainable visits.

In Chapters 6 and 7, the focus shifts from the visitor to local actors that enable a destination. In Chapter 6, Cöster & Skoog describe how a public organisation (Region Gotland) can contribute to making a destination more sustainable. They emphasise that it is not enough to address sustainability in organisational goals and strategies, and that there is also a need to develop management control processes and systems that facilitate sustainability.

While Chapter 6 illustrates the internal complexity in a public organisation's sustainability work, in Chapter 7, Sjöstrand, Gebert Persson & Ågren illustrate the history of organising a heterogeneous landscape of actors on the island of Gotland. They also critically discuss the UNWTO's strategic view of the Destination Management Organisation's role in organising a place into sustainable destination.

In Part III – **Visited**, Heldt Cassel & Stenbacka demonstrate in Chapter 8 how different practices develop through social dynamics in a peripheral area. While some visitors are welcomed, others are perceived as more problematic, and locals rather try to cope with different tensions that arise as a result.

In Chapter 9, Oxenswärdh turns the focus towards the entrepreneurs and their role as co-creators of local sustainable tourism. Although entrepreneurs are innovative and creative, they commonly struggle to make a living from their businesses. An argument put forward in the chapter is the role that academia can play in facilitating interactions between entrepreneurs while playing a part in individual and collective learning on sustainability.

Learning and education is also a theme for Chapter 10, where Kelman discusses how disaster visits can serve as a possibility to learn from the causes of previous mistakes and can create awareness of the necessity to understand that nature and humanity are co-dependent and co-existent.

In Chapter 11, Hylland Eriksen discusses what happens when tourism abruptly halts and how the absence of tourism impacts small societies. Hylland Eriksen compares different small island developing societies (SIDS) and their vulnerability in relation to tourism, in his discussion of how to ensure sustainable hospitality.

In the final Chapter 12, we present some insights and conclusions based on the content of Chapters 2-11, and where to go from here to enable sustainable visits.

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