When the history of tourism is written in its encyclopedic detail, it will recount the influences of ancient civilizations, empires, and dynasties (e.g., Persian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Roman). Their relics are the antecedents of today’s great cities, with road and infrastructure networks, centers of learning, culture, language, religion and architecture, systems of law and government. Particularly in Europe and Asia, this heritage endured over centuries and is today’s tourism attractions that draw intense visitor curiosity.

Tourism is commonly reflected through history as movements of people across neighboring towns, regions, and countries. Some researchers mark the beginning of tourism from the late seventeenth century when the classic ‘Grand Tour’ reached its pinnacle led by the British aristocracy, landed gentry, and wealthy European citizens, as ‘tour-ists’ pursuing experiences in European classics and culture.\(^1\) Grand touring via horse-drawn carriage took months and years, and Italy and France were the most popular destinations.

Over time as the steamboat and railway opened up once impenetrable frontiers, so too the automobile and airplane eventually became modes of transportation that facilitated quicker travel through contiguous states and from lower societal strata. These transit modes would move people over greater distances, in larger numbers and in progressively shorter times, eventually making business, leisure, or holiday travel commonplace.

On the demand side and in the current digital age, advances in Internet and mobile technologies brought travel planning literally to the palm of the hand, where an entire vacation can be decided in a matter of minutes. The immediate consequence was a reduced need for intermediary travel agents and a continued explosion of booking websites that ensured wide access to digital tools best exemplified by the Airbnb accommodation- and Uber ride-sharing platform applications. Described as the ‘sharing economy’, these sites are most amenable to today’s twenty-first century traveler—the younger, upwardly mobile millennials (ages 18 to 37), who are already reshaping current and future tourism demand, behaviors and trends.

\(^1\) U. Gyr, “The History of Tourism: Structures on the Path to Modernity,” European History Online, 12 March 2010, http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/europe-on-the-road/the-history-of-tourism/ueli-gyr-the-history-of-tourism/?searchterm=history%20of%20tourism&set_language=en.
On the supply side, the 1960s and 1970s saw surges of mass tourism in European countries like Spain\(^2\) as part of economic policy that brought rapid investment and development, growth, and prosperity, especially to high-valued real estate locations along Spain’s east coast and in Mediterranean regions with their beaches and agreeable climates. The higher the arrival numbers, the more successful the destination was considered. Mass tourism, however, eventually caused overcrowding that disrupted livelihoods and impaired landscapes, quality of life, and services.\(^3\) Once entrenched it was difficult to reverse. While overcrowding was a phenomenon observed in eighteenth-century Spain and Italy, today’s ‘overtourism’ at the most popular of European city destinations, i.e., Barcelona, Amsterdam, Dubrovnik, and Venice, bears the same hallmarks,\(^4\) with high numbers of visitors that have spawned protests and complaints by residents.

The term ‘sustainability’ evolved from early usage in the eighteenth-century forestry industry\(^5\) when foresters warned of the threats to long-term commercial logging from overconsumption of timber resources. In the 1960s, sustainability was associated with objectives to arrest the poisoning effects of manufacturing process discharges in the environment, which had devastating consequences for human health and ecosystem integrity. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, sustainability was associated with the social and environmental consequences of high rates of production of goods and services driven by higher levels of consumption, which depleted resources and perpetuated a vicious cycle. In that respect, the focus was on industries such as tourism with its high growth and consumption rates. Most recently a portmanteau of terms has emerged (e.g., ecotourism, geotourism, and responsible tourism) to promote more ethical objectives for tourism development,\(^6\) yet with little clarity of concept. As noted below, confusion in the use and multiplicity of terms presents a significant barrier to sustainable tourism.

The core issue is the scale of depletion of land, water, energy, and raw material resources with consequent impacts. Coastal and waterfront areas are

\(^2\) F. Almeida Garcia, “Tourism Policy and Territorial Imbalances in Spain (1),” *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series* no. 22 (2013): 7–19.

\(^3\) Id.

\(^4\) See “Barcelona Approves New Law to Limit Tourist Numbers,” *Condé Nast Traveler*, 27 January 2017; “How Much Tourism is Too Much?,” *The New York Times*, 29 June 2017; E. Becker, “The Revolt against Tourism,” *The New York Times*, Sunday Review, 17 July 2015.

\(^5\) World Ocean Review 4: Sustainable Use of Our Oceans—Making Ideas Work (Hamburg: maribus, International Ocean Institute, and mare, 2015), 10, http://worldoceanreview.com/wp-content/downloads/wor4/WOR4_en.pdf.

\(^6\) “The Case for Responsible Travel: Trends & Statistics 2017” (Washington, DC: Center for Responsible Travel, n.d.), http://responsibletravel.org/docs/The%20Case%20for%20Responsible%20Travel%202017_Final%20for%20Release.pdf.
pressured by high-valued tourism development. Forest and marine ecosystems and their inherent ecosystem services (e.g., provisioning, regulating, prevention, and recreation)⁷ are affected by hotel and resort development, cruise operations, construction of service roads, and other infrastructure. Water and energy use by hotels and resorts have often compromised the reliability of local supply sources. Inefficient or outdated appliances and equipment, and inefficient or wasteful processes have emitted polluting gases and generated solid wastes. Airplanes emit significant greenhouse gases. Increased visitor numbers are testing the patience of residents. Collectively, all these threaten to overwhelm national and local government capacity to manage, accommodate, and control tourism impacts.

The prospects for managing tourism impact are discouraging. The World Tourism Organization indicates that tourism currently generates 1.2 billion arrivals—projected to increase to 1.8 billion by 2030—accounts for 10 percent of global GDP, one in ten jobs, and 7 percent of global exports. This makes tourism an attractive development strategy for countries. UN Environment, however, is cautioning about pursuing high-consumption forms of tourism development. If left uncurbed, current rates of tourism energy and water consumption could double by 2050 along with the costs of remedial action, particularly for least developed and developing countries.⁸

The problem lies in the unknown size of the tourism value chain, unchecked visitor arrival numbers and unmitigated consumption. Tourism is also now a contributor to major global issues such as global warming, increased disaster impact, and biodiversity loss. Climate change is exacerbating these issues by amplifying geographic and environmental risks,⁹ which are reverberating in increased local conflict and disruption. This is unwelcomed news for destinations.

Since 1972,¹⁰ the United Nations’ involvement in sustainable development has done much to elaborate the concept of sustainability and to advance related thought, practice, and knowledge. Progress was made on the tenets of

₇ See “Ecosystem Services,” IUCN, https://www.iucn.org/commissions/commission-ecosystem-management/our-work/cems-thematic-groups/ecosystem-services.
₈ United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization, “The Sustainable Tourism Programme of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns,” http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/brochure10yfptpupdated17oct2016.pdf.
₉ World Economic Forum, The Global Risks Report, 2016 (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2016).
¹⁰ The first major United Nations conference on international environmental issues, the UN Conference on the Human Environment, convened in Stockholm, Sweden, from 5 to 16 June 1972.
sustainable development (1992 Agenda 21), control of air pollutants (1987 Montreal Protocol), and global warming (1997 Kyoto Protocol), and reducing disaster risks (2005 Hyogo Framework), among other issues. Decades later and with agreement from over 190 countries, these UN-led actions culminated in the 2015 Paris Agreement to reduce global warming; the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals promoting prosperity, equality and justice for all; and the 2030 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. Through these and other UN programmes, countries are transforming their major impacting and consuming sectors.

A range of tourism actors has also been collaborating for decades (public and private sector, non-profits, international and regional agencies) to develop sustainability approaches, design and implement management systems, and co-ordinate action through partner networks. Hotels, as leading targets of these actions, achieved savings in water and energy consumption and land resources (percentage set aside for conservation), while also improving staff capability and community benefits. Many participants touted the advantages of saving money and being market leaders. These initial successes yielded best practice and case study publications that proved the sustainability business advantage. However, to overcome continued criticism of a lack of sustainability, the majority of tourism actors must participate, which is not the case today. Among many barriers cited, particularly by small- and medium-sized businesses, are lack of financial capacity to absorb improvement costs, limited know-how, and poor understanding of sustainability concepts, with perhaps the most daunting being the comparatively low return on investment.

With the recent spectacle of extreme events flooding city centers and devastating island communities, sustainability has once again been placed at the top of the international tourism agenda. Although rebuilding of destinations is projected to last decades, tourism services will gradually recover as infrastructure systems are restored. As tourism businesses face repeated cycles of business interruption from extreme events, they can no longer disconnect their operations from the destination’s vulnerability or the rising costs of climate resilience.

Large global businesses in financial, manufacturing, and retail sectors have organized to reduce value chain risks and decarbonize their operations, thus meeting investor demands for corporate social responsibility. They are also among a growing list of companies undergoing rapid digital transformation.\footnote{Sectors leading the digital transformation include financial services, retail, health care, government, and technology. See “Connectivity Benchmark Report 2017,” MuleSoft, \url{https://www.mulesoft.com/lp/reports/2017-connectivity-benchmark}.}
Notably absent, or at best underrepresented from these groups, are tourism businesses. This suggests that as one of the world’s leading economic sectors, the tourism economy is lagging behind other global sectors in its advancement.

While the destination’s sustainability should be considered a collective goal among its stakeholders, its management needs an altered viewpoint. Tourism is a dynamic, people-centered system characterized by varying needs interacting at the destination, with its available resources and attractions. The destination should satisfy visitor needs through quality services but in a reciprocal exchange that balances with those of resident communities. Viewing tourism as an ‘industry’ is to misunderstand its nature, managing it as a ‘sector’ is to miscalculate its consequence. Such a dynamic system requires agile, people-centered management approaches to address tourism impacts and to build a culture of service quality and innovation.

Moreover, the typical destination management agency, e.g., the tourism ministry or department has not, to date, been able to provide all the requisite skills to manage tourism’s organic nature, complexity and scale. They are traditionally under-resourced and frequently hampered by management processes that are unable to keep pace with the ever-changing demands of tourism stakeholders. In addition, these agencies are now increasingly tasked with responding to a global agenda and coping with fast-emerging, sometimes unanticipated local situations. At best, their response times may be described as excruciatingly slow or constrained by outmoded processes.

For countries where tourism is the leading economic sector therefore, there are three practices that need to be mastered:

**Long-Range Planning**

Developing long-range aspirational strategies with 20 to 30-year time horizons are important for presenting the tourism development objective in the context of national and local priorities, and to addressing the major global development issues and agreements discussed above. As a consensus document

---

12 The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) describes tourism in terms of absolute size, growth, and share of exports, as one of the most important industries in the world. See “The Comparative Economic Impact of Travel & Tourism,” WTTC (November 2012), https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/benchmark%20reports/the_comparative_economic_impact_of_travel_tourism.pdf.

13 For example, Spain adopted a longer-range view of planned tourism, Turismo 2020, after experiencing difficulties with its mass tourism strategies. See “Plan del Turismo Español Horizonte 2020,” http://statistics.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/spain.pdf.
it would be elaborated in partnership with a range of tourism stakeholders, which would ensure that its long timeframe remains impervious to changes in political administration. Co-ordinated by a lead agency, the strategy will be achieved through a succession of short-term, more adjustable action plans (3–5 years) by the co-operating public and private sector organizations that will sequentially accomplish the main goal. This is the fundamental purpose for building common support and sharing the burden of tourism management. Achieving the destination’s long-term strategy would be monitored via a digital platform that locks in tourism stakeholder commitment and action. This approach affirms the importance of planning as a continuous vertical and horizontal process and the use of digital technology as an enabling solution for speeding up achievement of the defined goal.

**Engaging Tourism Stakeholders**

The participation of a wide range of actors organized and communicating vertically and horizontally at the destination is needed to match the complexity of the tourism economy. This implies that public and private stakeholders and civil society groups are steadily engaged in planning, marketing, operating, and managing tourism, with the most agreeable outcomes. This also speaks to a tourism governance organization that is transparent, accountable, and guided by clear delineation of institutional roles and responsibilities, with resources shared and allocated to effectively accomplish the goal. The lead co-ordinating agency must have a clear mandate, vision, and institutional prowess to galvanize co-operation across sector agencies and ensure participation of businesses and civil groups, and also be accountable for outcomes.

**Measuring, Monitoring, and Reporting**

Building functional networks of participation across the tourism value chain also provides the co-operating infrastructure for measuring, monitoring, and reporting on sustainability outcomes. The use of digitized processes will instill discipline, spur innovation, and speed up advancement toward sustainability goals. Without digitization, destinations will remain forever reliant upon moribund systems ill-suited to today’s expanding traveller needs and global challenges.

In summary, sustainable tourism is fundamentally about destination stakeholders building up habits of excellence, continuous improvement, achieving,
and resetting new goals. These are tourism's traditional management weaknesses, which may gradually be remedied in cycles of repeated planning, doing, achieving, and learning. Advancement in sustainability requires a culture of innovation, good decision-making, and quality data managed through smart and available technologies. If these values and technology use are ingrained into management processes, twenty-first century tourism destinations are certain to offer innovative and competitive tourism services for the foreseeable future.