

A LOCAL TURN IN TOURISM STUDIES

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Key words: tourism; local turn; local communities in tourism; COVID-19; critical tourism; justice

Highlights:

The COVID-19 global pandemic has offered a transformational moment when a local turn in tourism is evident.

The local here is broadly inclusive of the local community, local ecology and all generations.

This articulation opens up potential for enlivening forms of tourism.

This local turn should become a concern of critical scholars who can flesh out its possibilities and limitations

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Introduction

During the development of the international tourism system, tourism studies has featured an interest in globalisation, global flows and global supply chains. Seminal texts shaped our understanding of tourism as a global phenomenon with justice implications (e.g. Mowforth & Munt, 2016). However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a potential moment for transformation in tourism (see Lew, 2020). Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2020) argued that COVID-19 provides an opportunity to “rethink the space inside and outside of tourism and hospitality by re-focusing on the local dimension of our space as the only guarantee of our own wellbeing, safety, and security” (p. 713). This builds on a long lineage of work focused on community-based tourism (see Walia, 2021), recent work on neolocalism (e.g. Ingram et al., 2019) and the edited book *Reinventing the local in tourism* (Russo & Richards, 2016).

We recognise this as a local turn in tourism that is indicative of a significant shift in thinking and practice of considerable importance to the future. In this research note, we take this opportunity to conceptualise the local and to articulate the possibilities for a local turn to address contemporary power imbalances and injustices in tourism by focusing on and empowering local communities. This is essential as we face a future full of challenges.

Moving from tourism imposition to local empowerment

Conventional wisdom defines tourism by the tourism industry that supplies products and services to tourists to meet their demand for tourism experiences. In this rendering, the place the local community inhabits becomes a “tourism destination” that “hosts” tourists. This makes local places into a sort of *terra nullius* (no one’s land), as the tourists and the tourism industry invade, occupy and usurp. Such language has been rare since Turner and Ash wrote *the Golden Hordes* (1975); but, arguably holds greater resonance since reports of overtourism in places such as Barcelona, Spain. Here, they have used the word *barriocidio* (death of the neighbourhood) to explain the impacts of overtourism on communities (see Hughes, 2018).

It was in response to such unsustainable tourism that Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) advocated for defining tourism by the local community. Higgins-Desbiolles expanded on this with her call to “socialise tourism” which she specified meant “to make tourism responsive and answerable to the society in which it occurs” (2020, p. 617). The purpose of such efforts would be to transform the power dynamics operative in contemporary tourism: “both tourists and tourism businesses ... must be socialised into supporting the ways, needs and interests of the local societies in which they tour or offer tourism services” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020, p. 617). This represents a considerable shift in thinking.

Tourism studies could be informed by the “local turn” in peace studies. This local turn has been controversial, as Ginty and Richmond noted: “attempts to consider local rights, needs and identity are often rebuffed as romantic, relativist or particularist, anti-democratic, anti-developmental...” (2013, p. 764). Collison, Darnell and Guilanotti’s critical analysis of “Sport for Development and Peace” (SPD) explained how “the idea and ideal of community are deeply embedded in the use of sport for the purposes of social development and peace” (2020, p. 280). Such analyses offer critical insights, including concerns for local community power dynamics and understandings of community as an ideal to be worked toward.

Localising Tourism

It is important to be precise in terminology. In the legal dictionary, “local” describes: “pertaining to a place” and “local allegiance, or allegiance due while you are in a particular place or country” (Local, n.d.). In our articulation of the local community as the linchpin of the local turn, we mean more than just a certain group of people associated with a place. Instead, we are more broadly inclusive of the local community, the local ecology (living air, land and waterscapes and more-than-human beings) and all generations pertaining to that place (including future ones).

Using this broader articulation of the local opens up potential for enlivening forms of tourism. As Bawaka Country et al. (2017) explained of Indigenous-led tourism:

... more-than-humans have agency that may shape or enable possibilities for transformative experiences... transformation can be grounded in the notion of continual co-becoming of Country. Here, rather than a passive backdrop to experience or place, Country is an active participant in learning ... Indeed, visitors become part of Country, understanding themselves as connected in deep ways, both to each other and to Country itself (p. 446).

Recent progress in legislating the rights of nature will support such holistic visions of local places in tourism. For instance, in 2017 the Te Awa Tupua/Whanganui River in Aotearoa/New Zealand was recognised:

... as an indivisible and living whole... a legal entity with ‘all the rights, powers, duties and liabilities of a legal person’ ... endors[ing] Māori tribal visions for knowing and caring for lands and waters and reassert[ing] a founding place for tikanga Māori (Māori law) for guiding regional natural resource governance and management (Ruru, 2018, p. 215).

This respect for local ecology as having legal personhood with legally enforceable rights and spoken for by locally grounded Indigenous People is a critical point here. This is also a potentially significant catalyst to sustainability and justice in tourism as Mika and Scheyvens (2021) explained in their analysis of Indigenous tourism along the Te Awa Tupua/Whanganui River as it offers more than just local livelihoods and ecological health, but also “the promise of a self-determining and decolonising development agenda” (2021, p. 15). Such transformations are not limited to Indigenous contexts as local communities increasingly assert custodianship (e.g. Key West Committee for Safer Cleaner ships, n.d.).

We can also see this local turn beginning to impact conventional tourism practices. For instance, the Aotearoa/New Zealand Tourism Task Force Interim Report (2020) offered a broad goal of “enriching Aotearoa”, defined as:

Nourishing people and place. Enlivening communities and culture. We are here to nurture this place, enriching generations with livelihoods, experiences and stories to share. We must own the impact of our actions and enable Aotearoa New Zealand to thrive by giving back more than we take (2020, pp. 31-32).

One of the consequences of globalisation and globalised tourism is that too many of us are no longer lovingly attached to our home places - whether in terms of the living environments or local communities of peoples. As a result, we fail to recognise our negative impacts on both communities and nature that are essential to sustaining us. This has led to perilous crises of global climate change, widescale pollution, biodiversity extinctions and social crises. The local turn that we describe here is an important catalyst to changing our consciousness, relationships and activities to prevent and mitigate such outcomes.

Looking Forward

Earlier work on the local in tourism has been helpful in thinking through sustainability and engagement with place (e.g. Sims, 2009). However, the disruption of COVID-19 has opened up the opportunity to pursue a wider local turn as we outline here. We concur with Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2020) who stated: “This historical moment is prompting us to enact a deeper connection with our space and local dimension to release novel connections, relations, and multiplicities rooted in more democratic, just, and balanced power-relations” (p. 718). Multidisciplinary approaches are needed to develop a research, teaching and practice agenda for this local turn, including decolonial, Indigenist, ecological, peace, feminist and queer studies. We would advocate it becoming a concern of critical scholars who can further analyse its possibilities and limitations (see figure 1 for a suggested schema). Not only does such an agenda support sustainability and justice goals in tourism, but it also encourages engaged, impactful research.

Local community level dynamics & worldviews	The ways stakeholder roles are transformed by local empowerment	Approaches to addressing power effects on local communities at all levels- local, regional and global	The wider structural context under which tourism occurs in local communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles of culture, religion, politics, ecology, etc. in shaping societal dynamics • Processes for inclusion of marginalised & discriminated against populations • Philosophical & cultural approaches to understand diverse worldviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case studies of success & failure • Practices e.g. appreciative enquiry & co-design labs to engage stakeholders in transformative approaches • Political approaches (e.g. subsidiarity for enacting a localising approach) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex, integrated, systems analyses to understand the limits & possibilities of localising approaches • Harnessing regional & international governance measures to enable local empowerment • Capacities of alternative economic approaches to support local communities (e.g. social enterprises, cooperatives & well-being economics) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systemic injustices inhibiting empowerment (colonialism, whiteness, patriarchy, etc.) • Global crises inhibiting thriving (e.g. climate change, pandemics, global financial crises) • Ongoing & thriving humanistic/communitarian/Indigenist/socialist social systems & supports

Localising- local to global approaches addressing power, justice & benefits

Figure 1: A preliminary schema to advance the local turn in tourism studies

This local turn will have its critics, particularly those that view the local community as a “host community” (meaning for tourists/tourism) (see Schweinsberg, Lai & Wearing, 2021). We note, a local turn does not mean becoming myopically local, because we clearly share a global world in need of greater global cooperation. Rather, a local turn offers an ideal for grounding tourism in social and ecological contexts for greater justice and sustainability. Understanding local to include local communities, local ecologies and all generations offers an essential approach for nourishing people and place, better harnessing tourism for positive futures.

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