

Can we have tourism without water?

Does tourism send the wrong message about sustainable water use?

Introduction

In 2003, the World Tourism Organisation recognised that fresh water is a critical element in tourism. However the way in which water is associated with tourism is not always clear cut. Water can be both a direct and indirect input in tourism-related activities. Dryland tourism destinations, particularly those that focus on nature-based and ecotourism, rely on a healthy environment with unspoiled nature and landscapes, and consequently indirectly use water to create the original attraction for tourists.

I am currently undertaking research with the School of Business at the University of Ballarat and the Water in Drylands Cooperative Research Program, based in Horsham in western Victoria on valuing, or understanding the relationship that water has with tourism – particularly in dry land regions. My main research focus is on what factors influence tourism accommodation managers in developing sustainable freshwater management practices in their business.

Why do this research?

Firstly, fresh water is a critical element of tourism. There are few destinations, regions or even businesses that are able to operate without using fresh water in some form. Even removing the basic utilitarian uses of fresh water for cleaning and food consumption activities, it is often an integral part of the recreation activities or the overall ambience of a place. There is a significant variety of recreational activities that rely on freshwater including fishing, swimming, boating, agritourism activities, golfing, spa and wellbeing tourism and skiing. But how many tourism destinations or businesses maintain gardens or water features that add an undeniable and often invaluable 'feel' to a place.

Tourism is also a high water user compared to other activities. Although this has not been measured in Australia, it has been found that when people go on holiday they tend to use significantly more water than they do at home. In major tourism regions such as the Mediterranean countries of Spain and Greece, water scarcity has become a major concern because of the warm, dry climate combined with the tendency of tourists to use considerably more water while they are on holiday they do at home, where the climate is often quite different. The United Nations Environment Program has estimated that tourists in Spain use as much as 440 litres a day, more than double the average Spanish citizen, but in some areas tourist water use is thought to be as much as seven times that of locals.

While some work has been done to identify the barriers that stop the tourism industry from developing a culture of sustainable resource management, there is still a considerable way to go. In relation to water use in tourism accommodation some of this relates to the variety and sheer number of tourism related accommodation enterprises. The vast majority of tourism businesses are relatively small and often family run. This means that the impact of tourism on water resources is not as obvious as it is in other industries such as agriculture and manufacturing, where the water usage appears to be more concentrated.

However this is not about saying to people that they cannot have a good time on their holiday!!!

Sustainable use of water in tourism

We have been looking at the issue of sustainability in tourism for a number of years now – from a variety of perspectives and in a number of different ways. Indeed in more recent times people in general have started taking the word sustainability quite seriously – and in terms of water use at home very seriously indeed – water restrictions have ensured that to large degree. Nonetheless people have started installing grey water systems, low flow shower heads, more efficient toilet systems etc. But are they doing it when they go on holiday? Current evidence suggests that they are not in general – I dare say this is an area that ecotourism operations are well and truly leading the way. It is also true to say that a lot of tourism marketing is aimed specifically at indulgence tourism – the long weekend away in luxury accommodation is an example – sustainable use of water is not necessarily in the mix on those occasions. But there is a wide variety of tourism accommodation styles from caravan parks, backpacker hostels, motels and hotels through to bed and breakfast and other luxury accommodation. Is water sustainability in tourism accommodation a “one size fits all” or should we be fine tuning our approach to different accommodation styles.

What do we mean by sustainability in tourism? It can of course mean different things to different people – I guess most recently, with the current global economic crisis – the sustainability scale has probably shifted to focus more prominently on financial sustainability. In small communities, such as the one I live in – social sustainability is a big issue as we face smaller population numbers and a higher average age within our community. But in tourism, particularly in Australia, it is environmental sustainability that is the lifeblood of the industry – if we do not ensure that tourism is sustainable in its environment then ultimately there will be no tourism there.

In fact it comes down to a balance and a combination of all those factors to form an equation:

Social sustainability + cultural sustainability + environmental sustainability = financial sustainability.

In the longer term, if one of those features is not sustainable then it simply will not balance.

Taking off my researcher hat for a moment – my family also runs a tourism business – in Dimboola on the edge of the Little Desert National Park in western Victoria – we’ve been in drought for around 13 years now. The Wimmera River, which flows right by our property – or should I say used to flow, is nothing more than a series of water holes in the lower catchment now. Just up the road is the small town of Jeparit – their biggest claim to fame, after being the birthplace of Robert Menzies, was Lake Hindmarsh, Victoria’s largest freshwater lake – it has been bone dry for more than 10 years now – once a thriving freshwater fishing location and was looked upon by many annual visitors as an alternative to the seaside. So we know what it is operate in a low water environment.

Right from the start we decided we needed to be an environmentally sustainable business – it was certainly an ethical decision for us – but has also turned out to be a financial one as well – last year we expanded our business to take over the local caravan park – in one month – by maintaining the property properly, we reduced the water bill by one third – that did not cost us anything to do – we just made sure that the infrastructure and equipment was looked after, cleaned and working as it should. By introducing some other water saving devices we have cut the cost down to half of what it used to be.

It also goes without saying that a proportion, and a growing proportion at that, of our customers are seeking a holiday experience that is sustainable – they may not put it like that – after all few people would ring up and books a ‘sustainable holiday’ - but they certainly appreciate what an operator does to make that experience more sustainable. It is also important – as with most things – that some businesses act as leaders in this area – showing others how it can be done.

It also helps if there are incentives for businesses to be sustainable – wouldn't it be good if the star rating system included a range of environmental factors as the norm and any negatives either reduced the rating or cost the business more to retain a rating. At present those businesses who are trying to do the right thing are paying extra to be rated as environmentally friendly.

Education is a big issue – both for businesses and consumers.

As a sector that is made up of many small business operators, the first thing I noticed was that anyone can get into tourism – great no barriers to entry, no qualifications etc. The downside to that is that standards and quality vary significantly. So while there are some fantastic operators, there are also a number that are not. Hopefully poor business practices and fewer customers will ensure they do not stay in the industry for long; however that also means that one bad tourism business can have a significant impact on a small rural or regional community.

It is important that when a business says it is 'green' or 'environmentally friendly' it actually is – like all things in tourism authenticity is critical. Even the ACCC has taken a stance on the issue of green washing in the context of the environmental claims made by businesses. They have recognised that more Australian consumers are making purchasing decisions based on environmental impacts – and that businesses are increasingly making environmental claims to differentiate their product or service.

Indeed one of the statements the ACCC makes in its consumer fact sheet about 'sustainable businesses' is 'Just because packaging is recyclable or a product is made from recycled materials does not mean that the product or the company producing the product is sustainable.' Clearly the ACCC sees that sustainability has greater meaning than just recycling – and quite correctly – sustainability is not a simple issue.

But does tourism marketing actually send the wrong message about sustainability?

Now I am certainly not trying to have a go at specific regions, businesses etc – because everyone has done their best to ensure that the images they present are the ones most likely to entice visitors.

My own particular research interest is on how water relates to tourism, so as we face a future with less water, we need to consider how that will impact on the expectations of visitors – green lawns and gardens, pools, spas etc and also how we promote an area.

This is my town – dry river bed – it has happened previously in 1967 – but the last lot of promotional photos that were used for the town – would no longer reflect what we have to offer visitors.



At the other end of the scale – this is a resort in Chile with the world's largest pool

- Nearly a kilometre long
- Covers around 20 acres or about 8 hectares
- 34.5 metres deep
- Annual maintenance bill of 2 million pounds



Of course to promote sustainable water use in tourism, we need to understand how tourism uses water. One way of breaking it down is to look at consumptive versus non-consumptive water use in tourism.

So what factors impact on sustainable water use?

- Supply security – if you don't have you can't use it.
- Psychology of water use in tourism – water has intrinsic value in tourism – the sounds of water for example are important – garden fountains, waterfalls etc
- Education – for both operators and consumers
- Marketing – how we promote water use in tourism

The Nature of Water.

Water is a **fragile resource – but we struggle to control it.**

In drought we do not have enough and in floods we have too much...but we cannot control it.

One drop of a hazardous substance can pollute thousands of litres of water. Pollution caused today could remain a problem for a long time to come and can impact tourism areas for long periods of time. Indeed, water resources are affected by many different water uses like agriculture, industry and households – tourism is just one of many – but it is highly consumptive in nature.

Water is one of life's most basic needs – yet in contrast it is one of life's greatest luxuries. We see people suffering from a lack of basic clean water facilities in developing nations; yet see bottled water sold in developed nations such as Australia for no real reason.

In closing a couple of pertinent quotes that sum up our relationship, and indeed tourism's relationship with water.

When the well is dry we know the value of water.

Benjamin Franklin

No water, no future

Nelson Mandela

La Vergne Lehmann

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