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**THE ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL POWER OF SLOW TOURISM FOR SENSITIVE YET PROFITABLE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: INTERNATIONAL INSIGHTS FOR AIRLINE AND BUSINESS TRAVEL FROM INTERCULTURAL STUDENT AND SPIRITUAL STAKEHOLDERS**

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**Abstract:**

Slow travel's key themes are environmentalism, sustainability, and low-to-no carbon emissions. Slowness has several practical and spiritual dimensions of meaning, central to which are environmental ones. As an opposite to slow tourism, airline travel has developed quickly in terms of airplanes, liberalization and technology, all related to the industry's efforts at more sustainability, but conflicting and seeking solutions within the airline and tourism industries, their customers and the global environment. Business travelers' motivations, decision-making and beneficiaries moved environmental and sustainability considerations up on its agenda, in contrast to traditional forms of business encounters. Youth and student travel grows in size and importance corresponding to the complex matrix of interests of its travelers and societies. Religious tourism has become a key sector of global tourism, with implications for religious sites' economies and environments. Altogether, increasing social and environmental considerations of fast travel forms and competitive industries as well as outlooks have come to be inspired by as well as enriched by more contemplative forms of slower tourism. It turns out that traditionally fast and less environmentally friendly and sustainable forms of travel and tourism approach many philosophical and practical tenets of slow tourism forms, especially sustainability, while traditionally slower and more contemplative kinds of tourism re-orient themselves to accommodate modern global travel facilities such as an increasing use of technology. This is an ongoing and interactive development that promises to put high demands on, yet likewise to benefit the here analyzed stakeholders and forms of travel.

**Key Words:** Sustainability, Slow Tourism, Airline Travel, Business Travel, Student Travel, Religious Tourism.

**JEL Classification:** Q56, Q57, Z30, L83.

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## Slow Tourism's Sustainability

### Development of Slow Travel

In the 1980s, an emphasis on quality of life, slower pace, relaxation, individuality, traditional culture and on cultural, local or ecological heritage gave rise to “slow” movements such as the Italian *Cittáslow* (“slow cities”) or “slow food” movements. Some see the slow movements connected by organic sustainability, respect for the seasonality and rhythm of travel, or their affective or multi-sensory dimensions, which allow to explore places and sights, but also feelings, sounds or tastes.

“Slow travel” or “slow tourism” is considered as a “viable” alternative to car or plane travel, being mostly “conducted” or “performed” over land or water, by means of foot, bicycle, train, coach, bus, ferry, canoe, kayak or sailing boat. It enables a more intense exploration of, engagement with, and enjoyment through the available or chosen transport, the destination and the localities, in a sustainable, supporting, conscious relationship with the environment, such as local landscapes and cityscapes. The slow speed and the time constraints of most people set limits to the mileage that can be achieved. This makes slow travel more suitable for short-to-mid-haul and intra-continental travel. Slow travel is then more likely the domain of relatively affluent and unbound tourists, such as backpackers on long vacations.

Recommended slow *actions and activities* are stopping at local markets, engaging with communities, emulating the locals in terms of habits such as eating or resting, or practicing the local languages and dialects. Desirable slow *attitudes* are seeing the journey as part of the pleasure, seeking out the unexpected, embracing lost connections on trips, or giving back to local communities. Slow *travel* sees the means and the time of transport and traveling as valuable parts of the vacation experience. Slow *tourism* applies to the destination and related activities, such as engaging with local landscapes and people. Hence they are two sides of one coin, characterizing the way to and within the destination.

### Environmental Considerations

While *green* travel focuses on technical aspects of transport, such as resource use or carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions, *slow* travel sees environmental considerations as significant, but not sole driver of the journey. Travelers with central environmental considerations are labeled “hard slow travelers,” while “soft slow

travelers” prefer either a slow travel mode or the slow experience, but consider environmental benefits just an added bonus.

Some hold that slow travel is also possible by cars, since, full to capacity, they rival trains for fuel- and carbon dioxide-efficiency per passenger kilometer. Others argue that: cars are usually not filled to capacity; worldwide on average, cars are not very fuel-efficient; for holidays, typically larger, emission-intensive and less environmentally friendly family cars or vans are used; and a car available at the destination often means longer or unnecessary trips.

Some hold that no special environmental actions or consciousness is required for slow travel, as it is about doing things with the right attitude towards time, and prioritizing quality over quantity of experience. Others maintain that the slowness of non-consumerist experiences implies minimizing the environmental or emissions footprint, thus making slow travel by definition environmentally friendly.

Slow travel is also associated with efforts of a low-to-no carbon footprint. The worldwide tourism industry’s emissions consist of: transport 87%, accommodation 9%, and tourist activities 4%. As transport has the largest share, slow tourism is considered as promising towards low-to-no carbon emissions. This especially since planes and cars are said to produce three to ten times more carbon dioxide per passenger kilometer than trains and five times more than coaches. Further suggestions to reduce the carbon footprint of slow travel are: longer stays, longer but fewer holidays, slow journeys combined with slow destination experiences, or several slow travel modes to and within the destination.

The slowest of all travel forms, relying only on the traveler’s body, walking is the most direct, close and intense engagement with people and environments. The term ‘budget’ travel is rarely used for walkers, as cost considerations are not essential for them. “Hard slow travelers” relate walking to the immediacy and simplicity of sensory experiences, such as the contrasts between city and country, coast and desert, cave and mountain, of being in tune with local populations or fellow travelers, or of exploring the topography.

Cycling traditionally has the flair and ethos of being slow, sustainable, low-carbon, and an individual lifestyle statement. Besides physical benefits, cyclists often name the bike’s flexible sociability as their reasons of choice: only the terrain (roads, cycle paths, cross-country) limits their experience, so stopping, starting, pausing, or

meeting other travelers is uncomplicated compared to train travel. While cycling can be disconnected from environmental concerns, its travel and recreational activity has the strongest symbolical value of environmental friendliness among slow travel forms.

Many see train travel as the ideal slow travel form: changing vistas to avoid boredom yet allowing observation of landscapes and people, and offering the choice between relaxation, observation, or interaction with fellow travelers. Most relevant for slow tourist travel are intercity trains between cities or countries. Short-distance trains (within around 100 kilometers) or long-distance trains (between 500 and 1000 kilometers) can pass one or several countries and scenic landscapes. Some doubt that high-speed or bullet trains (up to 500 kilometers per hour fast) are still slow travel. Yet apart from the time and distance covered, all aspects of train travel apply to them too.

Coach networks (such as Greyhound) serve even remote or rural destinations, thus are often associated with exploration. Their benefits are affordability; their downsides, limited space and comfort. Logistically between the coach and the car, hitchhiking benefits car driver and hitchhiker: both are entertained; the driver remains alert and the hitchhiker can acquire local knowledge. Hitchhiking has considerable environmental potential by improving car loads and reducing carbon footprint, outweighed however by considerations of social appropriateness and personal safety.

Some freighter or cargo vessels offer cruises with accommodation, without the amenities of ocean liners but much cheaper. Ports enable authentic local exploration but require flexibility, making it less suitable for very young, old or time-bound travelers. By contrast, small pleasure craft like canoes, kayaks or sailing yachts allow for very individual routes. The Caribbean is popular for charter, the Mediterranean for cruise trips. Yet even low-carbon water travel can upset local ecology (wildlife or habitat) by erosion or waves, water quality (sediments, spillage, or fuel or exhaust waste), or cause noise or air pollution (via motorized vessels, or sail boats towed into ports). Additionally, even low-carbon water travel often depends on high-carbon infrastructure, such as flights to or drives within destinations.

### **The Future of Slow Travel**

Three future scenarios are: 1) slow travel continues as a market niche of alternative tourism, chosen by middle-class travelers from developed countries or by socio-economically disadvantaged groups with few alternatives; 2) slow travel becomes mainstream as low-carbon travel, provided changes in tourist and industry behavior; 3) slow tourism develops differently across global transit regions, depending on infrastructure quality. Overall, slow travel aspires to be a credible “new,” “alternative” or “green” tourism.

### **Environmental Considerations of Airline Travel**

Since the turn of the millennium, the airline industry is increasingly balancing passenger capacity with environmental demands. Under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, tradable emission permits have become a key element of international climate policy. Carbon offsetting is seen as corporate commitment towards carbon neutrality. Some airports have restructured themselves accordingly; however, important questions remain, such as contesting their “spheres of responsibility” or “ownership of emissions” (from their planes’ starting to them landing, including taxiing and parking).

Implementing environmentally friendly policies will require increasing cooperation of governments and airports, and will depend on available technological solutions (such as emission filters), adopted policy measures (such as emission charges, fuel taxes, or restraint measures), and customer choices influencing the market (such as the selection of airlines for travel, or stock market investments in them). Overall, the airline industry tries to be ahead of the game for instance by innovative products, such as the Airbus 380, whose structure weight is made of up to one fourth of composite materials.

### **Social Considerations of Business Travel**

Traditional business tourism has due to progress in collaboration software that enables sophisticated video conferences, replacing physical face-to-face meetings with virtual ones, and alleviating the burden on time, money and environment in the form of air travel, accommodation, and pollution, and giving new meaning to the

terms “working out of the office” or “working anywhere,” thereby also enhancing the work-life balance. Some forms of traditional business encounters are still wanted, such as for sales or development people and major deals. But altogether, the return on investment of virtual travel is said to be superior to business travel.

Others maintain that, as transnational companies become ever more important for business tourism, extending and diversifying their global reach and their international dependencies, and relying on telecommunication technology only on lower and medium management levels, face-to-face meetings are still useful for global-level coordination. But even in that case, companies are increasingly asked by their stakeholders (whether governments, shareholders, employees, or residents) to consider their environmental impact, such as their carbon footprint. This means that while a few aspects and types of companies of business tourism might afford to ignore environmental considerations, most of its “user-intensive” travel forms seem to adopt them increasingly.

## **Stakeholders of International Tourism**

### **Travelers**

Stakeholders of a company or an organization are all who are interested in, or affected by its activities. Stakeholders of international tourism can be private, public or business individuals or groups (travelers, organizations or corporations). Travelers can broaden their personal horizons with new experiences and knowledge of other peoples and reduce their prejudices, or discover or engage deeper with issues of environmental preservation and protection, or promote peaceful relations among countries.

### **Destinations and Hosts**

Residents expect tourism to serve their interests above those of other stakeholders. Travelers contribute to the economic growth and development of host communities by buying locally produced goods and services such as food, accommodation, clothing, equipment, transportation, or additional cultural or educational activities. Many developing national economies are torn between their need of tourism profits and the socio-environmental costs of unregulated tourism development. Hence they

try to prevent further deteriorations of their natural or built environment by unsuitable tourism complexes.

Also, negative experiences might let them develop xenophobia, or pursue harmful actions such as prostitution or drugs. Yet tourism might also protect or conserve their landscapes, monuments or buildings, for instance by raising industrial, architectural or environmental standards. In any case, conflicts, wars, natural disasters, and the spread of communicable diseases remain the gravest concerns for developing countries.

### **Multinational Corporations**

Multinational corporations' global mergers and acquisitions (such as *ITT Sheraton* for hotels, *Star Alliance* for airlines, *Thomas Cook* for agents, or *Gray Line Worldwide* for operators) enable them substantial economies of scale and thus profits even from small margins. But the pressure from continuous product development and aggressive low-price marketing also hampers sustainable development. Corporate social responsibility aims to enrich classical economic outlooks with social concerns, such as ethical or environmental business behavior, improving the quality of life of residents, communities, tourists and society, thus benefiting all tourism stakeholders. Yet many businesses feel that their capacity for socially responsible actions is limited by their profit margins, disadvantaging them to other sectors that do not have such restrictions. However, even they concede that corporate social responsibility can be successful, provided reasonable financial margins. This double goal can be achieved with a good public relations department.

### **Tourism for World Peace**

For politically, economically and socio-culturally beneficial tourism, these elements have been suggested: 1) Protecting and encouraging cultural diversity in all areas of the tourism industry; 2) Reducing poverty by employing residents and local businesses for fair wages, and involving them in decision-making processes; 3) Avoiding to support conditions that lead to acts of conflict or violence; 4) Engaging in sustainable development by educated or at least caring ecotourism; 5) Physically and spiritually respecting peoples, traditions, spaces, and sacred or heritage sites; and 6) Supporting only tourism businesses which follow these principles.

### **Student Traveler Stakeholders**

Students travel less long, but more often; explore more destinations; spend more on travel, relative to their income; book more travel on the internet; are relatively undeterred by terrorism, natural disasters, or pandemics; aim at experiences involving local people; innovate technologically and socially; and exemplify responsible and sustainable tourism. Students see travel as a way of life and element of their identity, consisting of learning, meeting people, places and cultures, personal and professional development, and reinforcing positive values.

Student travel can thus contribute to the development and well-being of travelers, stakeholders, and societies educationally (broadening minds and horizons, accepting other cultures, questioning stereotypes, enhancing motivations, and improving interpersonal communication, self-awareness and confidence); culturally (raising trust, understanding, tolerance and compassion among peoples); politically and economically (stimulating or supplementing national outlooks, institutional programs, economic aid, or poverty relief); and socially and ecologically (being role models for interactions with host cultures and destinations through respectful and sustainable tourism). These elements parallel those of tourism for world peace, once more showing the interconnectedness of this paper's issues.

### **Religious Tourism Stakeholders**

Many religious sites were built in remote and pristine (such as mountainous) locations, fitting the ideal of pilgrimage as caring for the natural and social environment, and mediating between the natural, cultural and supernatural worlds. For example, Taoism and Buddhism venerate mountains (Chinese Buddhism's Four Sacred Mountains Wutai, Jihua, Putuo, and Emei are regarded as a bodhimanda, enlightened place, for a bodhisattva, enlightened being). Thus conflicts between sites' environmental and economic interests may erode their spiritual value. For example, the murals in northwest China's Dunhuang or Mogao Caves (or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas), painted between the 5th and 14th centuries across 577 grottos and 45,000 square meters, are being damaged by the many tourists who raise their internal temperatures.

Likewise, several of the 112 cultural tourist attractions on one of the four biggest Taoist mountains, Mount Wudang in central east China have been damaged, especially the Taihe (Golden Peak) and Zixiao (Purple Clouds) Palaces, while in the Taizi (Prince) Valley, the local government has constructed a concrete dam to raise the local water table for tourist leisure. Reacting, many religious tourist sites in China forbid littering, inscribing or photographing murals, open cooking, tree-cutting, or fireworks. Similarly, Santa Katarina Monastery at the foot of Egypt's Mount Sinai (or Jebel Musa) has benefitted from Egyptian, European and United Nations protection, preservation and awareness initiatives, and asks its daily 2000 visitors (and 300 nightly mountainside campers) not to pollute it in any way.

### **Conclusion**

Many of the traditionally environmentally harmful ways of travel (air, business) increasingly realized ways to combine profits with more ecologically considerate ways. Other forms, such as religious or student travel, had ecological and environmental considerations more built-in as part of their self-understanding, and even they continuously look for ways to improve and integrate them into their guest, host and site experiences. International tourism's facets reflect the insight that better business can be achieved not despite, but because of better environmental and social considerations.

Especially the seeming oxymoron between slow travel on the one hand and airline or business travel on the other hand makes course-changes of "fast travel" so interesting, insightful and valuable for slow travel. Likewise, the efforts of fast travel seem to be spurred by the philosophies, self-understanding and interactive ways of slow travel. Youth and student travelers might, due to their age, dynamism and possible future career aspirations, be familiar or even strive for environmentally or socially taxing travel forms as airline or business travel, while at the same time embodying (due to financial restrictions, but also inspired by deeper insight) more socially and environmentally-friendly travel forms, such as low-to-no carbon emissions and footprints.

Altogether, the relationship between slow and fast travel seems to be increasingly developing, interactive, and relevant for us to contribute to it, in daily life and further research.

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