Global conscious as a path to sustainable tourism: A perspective paper

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Abstract

Purpose: To explain how tourism and travel experiences contribute toward expanding global awareness and consciousness, which is necessary to achieve sustainable development in a integrated and rapidly shrinking world.

Approach: Consciousness is a major area of theoretical speculation and debate in neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, biology, quantum physics, and spirituality disciplines. These fields offer insights into how tourism contributes to an evolving global consciousness.

Findings: Global consciousness is needed to give a context and vision for addressing the pressing needs of our world today. It is a platform to integrate sustainability at the individual level, and it justifies the human desire for travel as a consciousness expanding experience. In this way, tourism can serve as a positive force for creating a truly sustainable future world.

Practical Implications: Global consciousness could be adopted as an 18th UN Sustainable Development Goal to give a holistic, spiritual and personal vision to sustainable development, which is currently lacking. Travel and tourism would be a major participant in achieving this goal.

Originality/Value: Global consciousness is a non-dualist visionary goal for humankind, and for travel and tourism, which could move both toward more sustainable outcomes than have the reductionist sustainable development practices of the past.

Pain Language Description: The global consciousness of individuals across the planet needs to be expanded and awakened to meet the challenges of today's shrinking and challenged world. If this were a UN Sustainable Development Goal, then travel and tourism would be a leading participant in expanding people's global consciousness.

Keywords: consciousness, UN SDGs, sustainable development, sustainable tourism, global understanding, holism, non-duality, panpsychism, deep sustainability
The concept of ‘global consciousness’ offers a potentially new and different perspective on how the role of travel and tourism contributes to the evolution of humans on the planet Earth, moving them toward a more sustainable future. By taking a broader perspective that encompasses both the entire planet and the inner self, global consciousness moves us beyond a focus on the segmented realms of superficial individual experiences and local or regional tourism impacts. The expansion or awakening of global consciousness may provide an antidote to the sustainability challenges of economic, technological and cultural globalization that is resulting in a planet that is more integrated, smaller, and sensitive to human impacts than ever before.

Past perspective: 75 years of developments, 1946-2020

Versions of environmental activism and social activism have been concomitant with the rise of the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s (Hall & Lew, 2009). Tourism has always been an indicator of industrialization, modernization, and globalization, although its current growth trajectory was not enabled until the end World War II. The post-war period has witnessed unprecedented changes, largely driven by advances in technology, that are now threatening the planet as home to humankind.

Sustainable development has dominated discourses over how to respond to global change since its introduction in 1987 when it brought forth a compelling and all-encompassing vision, reflecting the holistic nature of our planet (Hall & Lew, 2009). As humans, we inherently know that Waldo Tobler’s First Law of Geography (1970) is right: “everything is connected to everything else” (Waters, 2018). By integrating the goals of environmental activists, social development activists, and business community activists, sustainable development’s triple-bottom-line approach attracted a following that crossed much of the political spectrum.

Unfortunately, while many significant gains have been made since 1987 by individual and regionally across the globe, sustainable development has largely failed to stem human caused degradations that are resulting in increases in global warming, biodiversity losses, natural resource exploitations, income inequalities, and closed systems of governance (Ikerd, 2014; Roser, 2018). The travel and tourism industry’s consistent and rapid growth has been a major tool in the neoliberal globalization and shrinking of the planet (Harvey, 1990), thereby contributing to all of these issues, some of which have recently been generalized under the concept of ‘overtourism’ (Gonzalez et al., 2018).

In response to the complexity of the challenges faced, sustainable development was broken down into more manageable scientific specializations, resulting in a wide range of different definitions and methodological and policy approaches (Saarinen 2018; Nunkoo, 2019). Such fragmented reductionism resulted in the loss of sustainability’s original holistic vision, as it blossomed from a single goal of balancing environment, society, and economy, into today’s 17 disparate UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2018). Reductionism has also made some scholars jaded toward the entire idea of sustainable development and sustainable tourism, as seen in the many critiques of its failures and futility (Zimmermann, 2018; Kelman, 2019).

Such sentiments are mirrored in the general population who, while wanting to make the world a better place in some way, have been confused by, and have become resistant to, sustainability’s political rhetoric and perceived top-down policy impositions and lifestyle restrictions. ‘Sustainable tourism’ as a
concept has been especially difficult for consumers to even understand, let alone implement (Stone, 2019). For sustainable development to meaningfully move our planet away from its current trajectory, the values it professes need to become accepted and integrated into the every-day consciousness of every person on the planet. The current approach to sustainable development is not doing that to the degree necessary to avert pending disasters.

**Future perspectives: 75 years, 2020-2095**

Holism is the opposite of reductionism. It is the idea that the whole is greater than and different from the sum of its parts, and therefore needs to be studied and understood independent from the parts. Several global holisms paradigms could provide a more integrated and visionary foundation for sustainable development. These include the following, each of which could be considered a variation on the broader idea of ‘global consciousness’.

1. The Gaia Hypothesis (Cazzolla Gattiab, 2018; Lovelock, 1972), which envisions the planet as a self-regulating entity, comparable to how the human body is self-regulating.
2. Deep Ecology (Smith, 2014), which introduced ethical, philosophical and spiritual values into the human-earth relationship in the 1970s, and has formed a basis for the more recent concepts of (Very) Strong Sustainability and Deep Sustainability (Ikerd, 2014); and
3. Non-duality (Freedman, 1997; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2016) and Panpsychism (Goff, 2017; Skrbina, 2017), which are growing areas of interest today.

Consciousness (whether global or individual) is a significant area of complex debate in neuroscience, philosophy, biology, quantum physics, and spirituality disciplines. It is not a topic that has been widely covered in tourism studies, or even in the broader social sciences. Research into tourist knowledge, empathy, mindfulness, affect, and awareness of other peoples and places are related to consciousness, but still peripheral to its core definition. In simple terms, consciousness may be thought of as an entity’s awareness of its own existence, as opposed to simply existing without any such awareness. Who or what is aware is one of the primary philosophical questions in consciousness studies.

Global consciousness adds a planetary awareness to this definition. For the purposes of this discussion, global consciousness is simplified into three types, each of which builds on the others. (Note that there are other scales of consciousness besides the global, which are not discussed here.)

1. **Individual global consciousness**: each individual person’s awareness, beliefs, feelings, and sense of identity and belonging toward the planet overall, which is situated at a deeper level from surface ego experiences, being at the edge of conscious and subconscious being. Some existential tourist experiences come close to this, although degrees vary with higher states transcending the individual ego through a non-dual knowing of oneness, connection and responsibility for all creation.

2. **Collective global consciousness**: the shared feelings and beliefs of all people as a collective group on the planet, creating a kind of ‘global brain’ (Martins, 2019), which includes Jung’s (1968) ‘collective unconscious’, and may be expanded to non-human life forms and objects (e.g., panpsychism) (Koch, 2014), creating a commonly shared foundation for behaviors,
experiences, events and cultural evolution. This is somewhat seen in the recent ‘environmental personhood’ trend of granting human rights to rivers and other non-human entities (Benöhr & Lynch, 2018), although that is just barely scratching the surface of what a non-dual, deep ecology social value system might look like.

(3) Planetary self-consciousness: self-awareness by the planet of itself as an entity, somewhat like the Gaia Hypothesis. However, as a non-human entity, the planet’s self-awareness would likely be highly alien to the human experience (Frank, 2015; Jabr, 2019), which is why most people find this idea difficult to accept. (Note that the term ‘planetary consciousness’ has also been used by some as synonymous to ‘collective global consciousness’, described separately above.)

On a surface level, travel and tourism are most clearly associated with individual global consciousness. The travel industry actively promotes a distinct form of global awareness and knowledge through its efforts to sell place-based experiences (Figure 1). By consuming and performing surficial acts of travel, people consciously expand their internal knowledge (Skavronskaya et al., 2017; Lew, 2018). But at the same time, they less consciously develop varying degrees of empathy, citizenship, and self-reflection, leading to personal identity formation and degrees of existential connections with other people, places, and the world (Grimwood & Johnson, 2019). In this way, they unwittingly expand their personal global consciousness.

Figure 1. Ways that travel and tourism experiences contribute to expanding and awakening the global consciousness of individual tourists.

Source: Based on Lew, 2018.
The expansion of individual global consciousness through tourism is achieved because travel combines exposure to new places and new peoples with a temporary liminal alteration of conscious awareness. The traveler’s mind enters an altered state of openness to unknown opportunities that is similar to consuming alcohol, watching movies and tv programs, reading books, attending lectures, and meditation. This cognitive tourism shift allows for a restructuring of both the conscious and unconscious mind to be more globally inclusive in its fundamental world view (Skavronskaya et al., 2017). This happens with or without the tourist’s awareness, and whether or not the travel experience is judged to be good or bad.

Humans are addicted to mind altering experiences, driven by desires for various forms of escape, distraction, connection, and expansion. Travel may be the most desired of all such experiences because it is the safest way to completely and fully change all of one’s sensory experiences for a temporary time period. This is especially seen in the growing popularity of meaningful travel (Zinampan, 2018), transformative travel, and wellness tourism (Voigt et al., 2011; Barrie, 2019). At a surface level, the liminality of the tourism setting offers opportunities, but no guarantees, for non-dual, existential experiences of oneness and personal growth (Lew, 2011; Nelson, 2019).

While challenging to prove, each tourism encounter also shifts and expands the collective global (sub)conscious of humankind, and often toward more sustainable outcomes, at least in the long run. This is perhaps best seen today in the ‘no-flying’ (aka ‘fly-less’ and ‘flight-shaming’) movement, epitomized by Greta Thurnberg (Orange, 2019), which is expected to result in a decline (but not a stop) in the annual growth rate of air travel in coming years (Lee, 2019). The no-flying sentiments of a few appears to be reaching a tipping point in which it is influencing a growing mass of people, both consciously and subconsciously. Such a tipping point also appears to be occurring with respect to singleuse plastics, the decline in captive whales and dolphins for entertainment purposes, and a shift in tourist interests from ‘overtourism’ destinations to ‘undertourism’ ones (Ganaishlal & Lee, 2019). These changes seem to be especially strong in the collective consciousness of Generation Z youths, who will face the most dramatic impacts of climate change in their lifetimes (Cheslaw, 2019).

And even more challenging to prove, and maybe even to believe, the globe’s planetary selfconsciousness may also expand and grow through the individual travel experiences of its human parts. On the other hand, it is not necessary for individual tourists to believe that any of this is happening because it is the subconscious, the inner self that guides outer experiences and behaviors, that ultimately needs to evolve. By awakening to its true connection to the planet in this way, humankind has the potential to create and become the embodied values of sustainable development, and thereby bring balance to the technology driven time-space compression that has destabilized our planet.

**Conclusion**

Awakening the global consciousness of the inner self has mostly been relegated to the spiritual traditions of Asia and New Age teachings in the West. It is perhaps time for the United Nations to become more spiritual (but not necessarily religious) in its outlook by making global consciousness the 18th UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Such a move would bring back sustainability’s visionary sense that ‘everything is connected to everything else’ and offer a non-dualistic and non-reductionist
perspective on humanity’s relationship to its planet. It would give a spiritual and personal purpose to sustainability by promoting understanding, empathy, compassion, and love for other human and nonhuman entities.

Ikerd, et al. (2014) view Deep Sustainability as achieving these exact same goals, although in a more prescriptive manner than a global consciousness approach might entail. People tend to resist prescriptive approaches, at least until their values and intuitions are in alignment with those prescriptions. Awakening global consciousness is essentially about people coming into alignment with the planet, which is also an alignment with sustainability.

There are many ways to bring about such a planetary sustainability alignment. At one level, global consciousness will inevitably expand without significant conscious effort – it is more evident today than ever before, for example. On the other hand, individual tourists and the tourism industry could hasten this awakening by considering the full planetary impacts of their travel and tourism decisions and behavior. Education and research to expand our knowledge, both conscious and subconscious, is also crucial to planetary alignment, though its limits must be recognized. A constant focus on the planet as who we are as individuals would be a major shift in consciousness from the human-centered focus of the past. It may take 75 years for the full shift to a global Deep Sustainability consciousness to become a living reality. But travel and tourism most has the potential to become a major core participant in achieving this lofty SDG.

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