

Article

## Critical Sustainability: Setting the Limits to Growth and Responsibility in Tourism

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**Abstract:** The idea of sustainable development has been discussed in tourism research for almost a quarter of a century. During that time, sustainability has become an important policy framework for tourism and regional developers guiding their planning and development thinking. Sustainability has also emerged academically as an important field of research with an emphasis on defining the limits to growth and responsibilities in tourism. However, while there are urgent needs to incorporate sustainability into tourism, there is also a growing amount of frustration among scholars on the conceptual nature of sustainability and how tourism as a private-driven economic activity relates to the ideals of sustainable development. This has created an increasing need to understand and potentially reframe the concept. The purpose of this paper is to overview the conceptual dimensions of sustainable tourism and discuss some of the main sources of frustration. Based on this, it is concluded that while a conceptual plurality seems to be unavoidable, there is a need to re-frame *i.e.*, rescale and decentralize tourism in policy frameworks and practices aiming towards sustainability.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism; responsible tourism; limits to growth; governance

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### 1. Introduction

Sustainability has emerged as a paradigm in tourism planning and development. The demand for sustainability in tourism is based on several interrelated processes. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the growth of global tourism has been intensive, with significant impacts on the tourism system in a

global-local nexus. These impacts and especially the negatively perceived outcomes of tourism growth in destination regions highlighted a need to guide and limit tourism growth in many places [1–3]. In addition, the societal context in the late 1960s and 1970s supported the focus on environmental concerns and global inequalities: the emergence of the environmental movement, the limits to the growth debate (see [4]) and a north-south divide in global politics, for example, had a strong influence on the discussion on the nature of tourism development [5]. Rather than focusing on the limits to growth or inequalities in global tourism, however, the discussions were more grounded on a destination or site scale analysis (see [6]).

The political conceptualisation of sustainable development presented in the Brundtland Commission's report "Our Common Future" in 1987 [7] further fuelled the policy aims and needs to limit the impact of tourism. By the early 1990s, the idea of sustainability was built into tourism development [8,9] with an evolving number of conceptualisations and a search for indicators (see [10–13]). At the same time, the transformation of production and consumption in Western societies towards post-Fordist production supported alternative and 'green' trends in consumption, including the tourism sector. This resulted in a number of new forms and terms such as ecotourism and responsible tourism [14,15] which were often seen as more 'environmentally conscious' products [16,17]. Recently, sustainability in tourism has been linked to ethical consumption [18,19], including high level policy aims to reduce global poverty, for example (see [20,21]). Related to this, the Secretary-General of the UNWTO, for example, has stated that the global tourism industry could play a major role in the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UN MDGs) by 2015 [22]. Similarly, the World Bank [23] has emphasised the transformative role that tourism might play in developing economies and poverty alleviation and/or elimination.

Indeed, the tourism industry has become responsible for various aims and impacts on global and local scales. In general, responsible tourism refers to tourism development principles and practices aiming to make places better for people to live and visit [24]. It aims to minimise the negative and maximise the positive social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism in destination communities and environments by promoting ethical consumption and production among all stakeholders. Although the concept of responsible tourism is often used as a specific form of tourism, its principles and guidelines are rather similar to the general aims of sustainable tourism: according to Richard Sharpley ([25], p. 385) "it is difficult, or even impossible, to distinguish responsible tourism from the concept of sustainable tourism". He has also critiqued whose responsibility we are referring to when using the concept. Indeed, it is important to identify who actually are responsible and for what, *i.e.*, are we, the industry, governmental agencies *etc.*, responsible to local communities, societies and people in general, for example, when aiming to develop and manage tourism in a responsible way.

While responsibility is partly built on the same grounds as sustainability in tourism with over-lapping targets, there is a contextual difference. Responsibility discourse is also a product of neoliberal "self-organising" modes of new governance with resulting corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and the creation of a "perfect green consumer" who does not consume less but consumes in a responsible way (see [16,26]). An increased focus on responsibility also has an academic grounding. In geography, for example, Smith [27] has discussed "the moral turn" in human geography and Lawson [28,29] and Gregory [30] have emphasised a need for caring not only for "our own" but for

distant strangers, which resonates well with the recent discussions on responsible tourism and especially volunteer tourism (see [31]), for example, aiming to social development goals in destination communities.

Overall, the need for sustainability in tourism is an outcome of a complex set of processes, systems, aims and scales (see [32]). This has led to a multifaceted conceptual ground of sustainable tourism and a criticism concerning the clarity and meaning of the concept and its applicability in tourism (see [33–36]). Swarbrooke ([37], p. 41) has stated that “sustainable tourism is perhaps an impossible dream” and some scholars have even suggested that we should actually get rid of the concept and idea of sustainability in tourism. According to Sharpley ([38], p. xiii), for example, it is time to move beyond sustainability as the “academic study of sustainable tourism development has reached something of an impasse”. While criticisms and evolved frustrations are understandable, the demand for sustainability, responsibility and limits to growth thinking in tourism has not disappeared; in fact, the reality is quite the opposite. According to the World Bank ([23], p. 11) “tourism is a three-billion-a-day business”, the growth of which is estimated to reach 1.6 billion international tourists arrivals by 2020 (UNWTO, 2013). As further noted by the World Bank ([23], p. 7) the tourism industry and its growth “comes with its own set of risks and challenges”. Therefore, the need for the idea of sustainability in tourism is now more urgent than ever before.

Instead of actively sinking the idea of sustainability, there is a need to further reflect on the conceptual idea of sustainability, including the issues of responsibility, in tourism and evaluate the potential reasons why we have failed to progress faster in sustainable tourism research and operations in practice over the past 25 years. The purpose of this paper is to critically overview the conceptual dimensions of sustainability in tourism based on the literature and previous discussions. As the focus is on sustainability on tourism, the reviewed literature is mainly based on (sustainable) tourism studies with links to general sustainable development and governance literature. After a short conceptual overview, some of the main sources of criticisms and frustrations are discussed. Finally, the critical points of departure in the sustainability in tourism and development are evaluated.

## 2. Sustainable Tourism

### 2.1. Sustainable Development in Tourism

The general idea of sustainable development has been described as complex, vague and difficult to operationalize in practice, and these elements have followed many of the later definitions of the World Commission on Environment and Development’s (WCED) [7] original formulation (see [39,40]). While the concept involves analytical weaknesses, it has also provided a common platform on which different stakeholders in development can interact, negotiate and reflect on the consequences and limits of their actions for the social, economic and ecological environment [6]. Due to conceptual ambiguity, though, many scholars in tourism research have stated that there are no exact working definitions of sustainable tourism, which has partially made progress in research slow (see [2,11,41]).

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO) ([42], p. 12) have defined sustainable tourism as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. Similarly as the “mother-concept” of sustainable development,

the above definition is value-laden and open to multiple interpretations and perspectives with corresponding references for the rhetoric of sustainable development as a holistic, future-oriented and socially equal global scale process [32,38,43]. All this has resulted in different understandings of, and perspectives on, sustainability in tourism and how the limits to growth are defined in tourism. Next, some of the main perspectives of setting the limits to growth in tourism are discussed based on the previous categorisation (see [6]).

## 2.2. Different Traditions of Sustainable Tourism

Based on the existing studies on sustainable tourism, several interrelated traditions focusing on the limits to growth in tourism can be identified. These traditions, which have been previously termed resource-based, activity-based and community-based sustainability in tourism (see [6]), differ in focus and in their understanding of, and relation to, resources used in tourism (Table 1). The traditions are characterized by different ideas on the nature of the limits to growth and different perspectives on these limits and how they can be known and defined. Although the impacts of tourism are increasingly global and operating in the whole tourism system (involving destinations, the generating regions of tourists and connecting routes), the main emphasis of past and existing research, management and policy activities has been largely based on the destination (*i.e.*, local) level.

**Table 1.** Traditions of sustainable tourism and setting the limits to growth.

	Resource-Based	Activity-Based	Community-Based
Origin/Manifestation	Carrying Capacity Model	Product Cycle (TALC)	Participatory Planning
Orientation	Environment (physical)	Industry	Community
Limits to growth	Objective/Measurable	Relative/Changing	Constructed/Negotiated
Resource and system view	Static	Dynamic	Dynamic/Static
Time scale	Long	“Now”	Short

The initial conceptualizations of the limits to growth in tourism were related to the carrying capacity model. It has its origins in the 1920s and 1930s’ tourism and recreation studies (see [44,45]) but the major research boom materialized in the 1960s and 1970s and continued until the early 1980s (see [46–50]). While carrying capacity thinking may be regarded as a historical phase in tourism studies, it is still occasionally interpreted as an application of sustainable tourism (see [34,51]) and, thus, the concept occupies a key position in understanding the limits to growth thinking in tourism [52,53]. In research, the carrying capacity model led to a search for the ‘magical’ number of tourists in a certain space (and time period) which cannot be overstepped without causing serious negative impacts on the resources [54–56]. This resource-based tradition has its roots in the natural sciences and positivism, implying an objective and measurable limit or stage of growth at which there is no room for any more tourists or tourist activities in a certain environment [57]. In order to achieve further growth, tourism actors will have to cope with the environment in a better way without significantly changing the resource and its integrity. Thus, the limits to growth and impacts of tourism are evaluated in relation to the resources used and the assumed or known natural or original (non-tourism) conditions (see [58–60]). Obviously, the challenges are how to define the original

non-tourism conditions of the resources or how to separate the impacts of tourism from changes caused by other activities and natural or human-induced processes taking place the same space (see [61]).

Tourism development always causes some impacts, which leads to the critical question of which impacts are ‘objectively’ acceptable and to what degree [6]. Indeed, tourism is a dynamic activity that transforms its resources and changes their capacity to absorb tourism via management actions and product development (see [32,54]). Therefore, the resource-based focus as a ‘static’ limit has turned out to be problematic for the industry. In this respect, McKercher [62] has emphasized that the tourism industry actually needs to play an active role in defining sustainability in tourism (see also [63]). In this respect, the industry and related institutions, such as the World Tourism Organization, have been actively involved in defining the goals and principles of sustainability and related policies (see [9,42]). These industry perspectives refer to an activity-based tradition of sustainable tourism. In contrast with resource-based sustainability, tourism actors do not primarily alter their behaviour based on the static interpretation of the limits to growth: in order to grow, the industry and other related actors can, and quite often do, modify the environment for their economic development purposes.

The activity-based tradition is industry-oriented. It refers to tourism-centric approaches in tourism development discussions [64], focusing on the needs of tourism as an economic activity [38] and its resource base [37]. From this perspective, the limits to growth are not primarily based on the capacity of the destination and its original resources for absorbing tourism, but on the industry and its capacity or incapacity to generate growth. This approach is illustrated in the evolution of the tourism area life cycle model [65], in which the relationship between life cycle—representing tourism growth—and the limits of carrying capacity is a dynamic one [66,67]: after a stagnation phase, indicating that the limits of carrying capacity have been reached, the development of a tourist destination may actually be activated again based on new products, infrastructure development and marketing, for example. Thus, the activity-based tradition is grounded on a relational approach and understanding of space (destination), which implies that certain tourism activities, tourist segments or products may have different kinds of limits to their growth and their ability to absorb increasing numbers of tourists. A non-growth situation implies that the limits to growth are reached and modifications are needed in tourism products in order to achieve further growth (see [65,68]).

In this respect, the relation between resource-based and activity-based sustainability can be quite conflicting. As the number of tourists increases and the destination evolves (*i.e.*, grows) cyclically through changing modifications of destination as a product, indicating that the limits to activity-based sustainability have not yet been reached, tourism growth may overstep some of the resource-based limits to change [6]. In order to overcome the potential and often highly probable conflicts between the industry, other stakeholders and resource use, various participation processes and governance models have been used and developed. These processes refer broadly to community approaches in tourism studies [69,70] in which the setting of limits to growth is based on participation and negotiations (see [71,72]). This community-based tradition aims to involve communities and other (local) stakeholders in tourism development and management by stating that communities should have control over the uses and benefits of (common) resources used in tourism (see [73–75]). Thus, in order to reduce the negative impacts of tourism and safeguard effective benefit sharing, local participation, awareness creation and control over tourism development are said to be needed [76–78].

The community-based tradition strongly implies that the limits to growth are socially constructed (see [79–81]). This does not indicate that the limits are fluid or open to any given definition but they are identified by a wider set of actors than the industry or the environmental issues alone, for example. From the community-based perspective, sustainability refers to the maximum levels of the known (or perceived) impacts of tourism that are permissible in a certain time-space context before the negative impacts are considered to be too disturbing from the perspectives of specific social, cultural, political or economic actors who possess sufficient knowledge and power over the chosen indicators and criteria [6]. Thus, the issues of power and knowledge are in a key position: while tourism impacts do exist in a physical “reality” (e.g., in resource-based world) outside human values and perceptions, in the world of meanings and human preferences, the question of whether these changes are acceptable or unacceptable depends on specific (societal and/or individual) values, attitudes, knowledge and priorities concerning the role and impacts of tourism (see [32,82,83]). All these are linked to the idea of power, *i.e.*, an “ability to impose one’s will or advance one’s own interests” in development as stated by Reed [84]. According to him, power comes across as an instrument to be managed and based on this, it is necessary to safeguard an equitable power sharing among different stakeholders in tourism. The community-based tradition aims to empower specifically the host communities in tourism development and the governance of key resources [85]. Thus, for community-based sustainability, the determination of the limits to growth is associated with power relations constituted by different stakeholders, which are constantly transforming, making the decision-making process challenging [86].

### 3. Sources of Frustrations in Sustainable Tourism

Since the 1990s, the idea of sustainable tourism has charmed academics, tourism developers, NGOs and policy-makers. However, almost from the beginning of sustainable tourism discussions it has also attracted harsh criticism [34,62] and recently, there have been increased calls for going beyond the sustainable development paradigm in tourism studies (see [38]). Indeed, there are many problems involved in sustainable tourism and especially in relation to sustainable development—issues which have been widely discussed elsewhere (see [6,33,35,36,87]). Instead of repeating the existing critical debates in full, as they are generally known and discussed in tourism studies, the following key sources of frustration are briefly discussed and re-framed: conceptual vagueness, ideals *versus* reality in practice, and locating responsibility.

Similar to the idea of sustainable development, the concept of sustainable tourism is said to be vague [34–36,43]. Indeed, several conceptualisations exist and some of them are potentially conflicting with each other and the discussed traditions of setting limits to growth in tourism. Swarbrooke ([37], p. 13) for example, has defined sustainable tourism as “tourism which is economically viable but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and the social fabric of the host community”. While it is a solid definition, it evidently focuses on the needs of the tourism industry and the sustainable use of its resources (see [88]), *i.e.*, representing the activity-based tradition of sustainability aiming to sustain tourism. Burns [64] has termed this kind of view of tourism development as the “Tourism First” approach, which indicates that developing the industry is the focus of evaluations and planning.

Various perspectives and competing ideas of the concept of sustainable tourism can be seen as problematic. However, while they are challenging for researchers and policy-makers, it is good to note that there are very few, if any, conceptual definitions in the social sciences we universally accept as being “the definition” and the only existing way to understand an issue. In addition, a value-based nature of sustainable tourism has been regarded as a major challenge for the concept (see [36,38]). Indeed, sustainable tourism is value-laden idea, but in contrast to physics and other natural sciences, for example, concepts in the social sciences in general tend to be loaded with values. They are also used in academic and societal discussions and politics based on different kind of ideologies and socio-economic and cultural preferences and aims. By replacing sustainability with some other term pre-perceived as less value-based may not change the situation: as soon as adaptation or resilience, for example, were applied from natural science contexts to the social sciences, their definitions have multiplied and become transparently value-laden and contested (see [89–91]).

Thus, instead of criticizing the conceptual plurality or aiming for one universal value-free definition of sustainable tourism, it would probably be more fruitful and realistic to aim to recognize what kind of basic assumptions and preferences there are behind the utilization of the concept and setting the limits to the growth in tourism development in specific situations. However, this does not remove the other key problem of the conceptualization(s) of sustainable tourism: while it rhetorically refers to sustainable development, it seems to fail to deliver a similar kind of holistic framework [36], especially in relation to spatial and temporal scales. While tourism is a global scale economy and a system operating in “home regions” and “destinations” that are linked together by the means of routes and transit regions, the focus of sustainability in tourism has mainly been on tourist destinations or certain sub-parts and sites of destinations. As stated by Inskeep ([92], p. xviii), for example, “the sustainable development approach can be applied to any scale of tourism development from larger resorts to limited size special interest tourism...” This destination and certain tourist activity emphasis in sustainable tourism may grasp the most visible processes and impacts related to tourism, but only a fragment of the total (see [6,93]). In the era of climate change concern, for example, the destination view is limited and seriously problematic. Gössling *et al.* ([94], p. 208) have stated in their ecological footprint analysis of tourism in the Seychelles that “efforts to make destinations more sustainable through the installation of energy-saving devices or the use of renewable energy sources can only contribute to marginal savings” (to the environment) as 97% of the footprint is a result of air travel!

In addition to being a kind of a red herring with misleading clues to global scale responsibility, the ideals of sustainable tourism are difficult to put into place in practice [36]. These ideals involve, for example, the same set of three elements and principles as sustainable development: the elements of ecological, social and economic sustainability and the principles of holism, futurity and equity. However, tourism is often seen as an industry that principally places more emphasis on the economic dimension and the present context [64,95]. The economic preference and the predestined focus in the industry is well implied in Getz’s ([96], p. 24) definition of a touristic space as being “an area dominated by tourist activities or one that is organized for meeting the needs of visitors”. This means that the needs and values of the customers (non-local people) and the industry are the leading guidelines in market-driven economic activities like tourism. While the tourism-centric view is understandable, as without economically viable businesses there is no tourism (including sustainable tourism), it basically challenges the ideal of the equity between the elements and principles of

sustainability in tourism. As noted by Eagles ([97], p. 231), “financial efficiency may be a pivotal criterion given more importance” in the governance of tourism and recreation in protected areas, such as national parks. Thus, in tourism the three “pillars” of sustainability are not often equal. Interestingly, in the context of recent discussions on resilience, which is occasionally interpreted as being the “new sustainability”, a similar preference for economic issues has been noted. A United Nations panel Resilient—Resilient Planet ([98], p. 12) indicated that the reason why the ideals of sustainability have not been implemented in practice is that “sustainable development has not yet been incorporated into the mainstream national and international economic debate”. What the panel indicates is that the economic pillar (element) is often “higher” than ecological or social ones, *i.e.*, economic issues are more relevant “now” when development needs and decisions are made. This problem and focus on the current (and local scale) context in policy-making and development practices in sustainable tourism, sustainable development or environmental politics, in general, can be seen as a “sliding present trap”. What the term means is that while economic issues are prioritized in the present day context, the environmental and wider elements of sustainability are seen to become more and arguably equally important in the future as the economic aspects in development. However, this equal future is like a horizon keeping its distance from the sliding present day context where decisions are (continuously) made and justified.

The sliding present trap makes the challenges to implementing the known or estimated future costs of growth to present day decisions and practices understandable (e.g., in tourism-climate change relations) (see [99]). This also relates to another source of frustration in sustainable tourism research and debates: responsibility and the question of whose responsibility sustainability in tourism development is [25]. There are basically two interrelated views on the issue of responsibility. On one hand, consumers are seen to lead the industry towards more sustainable operations due to increasing environmental awareness in societies, which is assumed to evolve towards higher demand for sustainable products. Changing modes of consumption referring to new tourism and higher environmental responsibility of the new tourists (see [17]) are further supporting the assumption. On the other hand, the industry is said to be adopting sustainable development principles and is therefore seen to progress towards responsible modes of production in tourism. This line of thinking is manifested in the Tourist Operators Initiative to Sustainable Tourism [100], for example, which set self-organized rules and indicators for tourism businesses. In addition, as indicated in the above, the assumed higher environmental awareness of the customers and estimated increasing demand for environmentally friendly products are seen to trigger the supply of sustainable tourism products (see [101]).

The logic of progressive responsibility in tourism consumption and production is rather coherent. However, previous studies indicate challenges in both views of responsibility. According to Sharpley [17], most academic studies show that despite “greening” attitudes, environmental concerns still remain low in tourists’ consumption priorities (see also [102–104]). In terms of tourism businesses adopting sustainable tourism principles, there has been improvement. However, the adopted or modified principles are often said to be “flexible” *i.e.*, industry-oriented, and the evaluation criteria used do not deeply reflect the ideals of sustainability (see [32,34,64,105]). The sustainable tourism strategy of Levi resort in Finnish Lapland, for example, states that the goal for social sustainability is that 75% of the employees working in the resort are local people. Compared to many other destinations in Finnish Lapland, however, it is not a remarkably “good” number [106]. Thus, the question is: does it represent

sustainability or is the limit set to a level that perhaps more or less legitimizes the current situation at the destination [107]? In addition to the problems with self-organized limits to growth and responsibility, only a relatively small number of businesses are actually aiming high or even beyond their legal obligations [25].

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1. Discussion

The idea of sustainability is important for the tourism of today and especially for its future. However, the criticism of the conceptualization and operationalization of sustainable tourism has recently increased. Still, deepening frustrations have yet to create viable alternatives to sustainability as a paradigm, and sustainable development and sustainable tourism are still in a high profile position in international and national politics, development and planning debates, and also in research. Nevertheless, the expressed criticism has relevant grounding, which underlines a need to understand and potentially re-frame the concept of how the limits to growth are set in tourism and how to overcome the perceived shortcomings of sustainable tourism in policy and practice.

A conceptual plurality seems unavoidable. Like most of the conceptual agreements in the social sciences, the meaning of sustainable tourism as a value-laden idea is—at least partly—dependent on the development paradigm and use context (see [108]). The overviewed three traditions have their origins in tourism and environment discussions, and also outside sustainable development thinking. The resource-based tradition reflects the limits of the original conditions of the resources used in tourism and the needs to protect the natural and socio-cultural environment from unacceptable changes caused by tourism activities. Contrast that to the activity-based tradition, which refers to the resource needs of the industry with aims to sustain the economic capital invested in tourism development. The community-based tradition strives to find a balance between tourism industry and different stakeholders, especially local communities, by emphasizing local involvement, control and empowerment in tourism development. All these perspectives have their advantages in different use contexts and they can complement each other, but in respect to the idea of sustainability and the future challenges of humanity, they all share the same major limitation, which is the strong focus on the local scale.

Thus, while we may need to accept the conceptual plurality and recognize the importance of context in research, there is a need to re-frame sustainability in tourism in a more critical manner. The key question is on what conditions sustainable tourism could represent sustainable development beyond the local scale, *i.e.*, in a local-global nexus. In the future, the local solutions to global challenges currently being sought and developed are not enough. Transferring ideals into practice by considering that the limits to growth on a global scale is a challenging but much needed exercise with an obvious probable conclusion ahead, implying that tourism involving a major component of air travel, *e.g.*, long-haul flights, cannot be sustainable [94]. This kind of conclusion is in conflict with the currently hegemonic idea of sustainable tourism, stating that all kinds of tourism can aim (realistically) to achieve sustainability in their operations (see [11]). The current implicit scaling of the limits to growth being potentially locally sustainable (*e.g.*, ecotourism operations in developing countries far away from

markets) but globally probably unsustainable is neither responsible nor sustainable. Sustainability in tourism is a matter of both local and global responsibilities.

In addition to the stronger recognition of sustainability on a global scale, there is a need to relocate tourism in sustainable tourism discussions. Instead of tourism-centric or “Tourism First” approaches, tourism as an economic activity needs to be decentralized *i.e.*, repositioned in the discourses and practices referring to sustainable development (see [15,33,109,110]). This means that instead of taking the (central) role of tourism as granted, the industry is rather seen as a potential tool for sustainable development—but not as representing sustainable use of resources *per se*. Thus, tourism is an option that could be used for sustainable development. The challenge of tourism-centric evaluations is not only an issue in sustainable tourism but more widely in tourism development-related discussions. Tourism’s role in regional development, for example, is often seen as positive, and tourism is stated to be used as a vehicle for regional development in various policy-documents. In this context, regional development is usually evaluated in terms of tourism employment, tourism revenue and tourist flows, *etc.* However, regional development (compared to growth) involves deeper and qualitative goals, referring to an improvement in the quality of life and well-being of the people, (see [107,111,112]) which are not automatic results of tourism growth indicators. Thus, based on the original conceptualization of sustainable development [7], sustainability in tourism development should primarily be connected with the needs of people—not a certain industry—and the use of natural and cultural resources in a way that will safeguard human needs and provide quality of life and well-being in the future (see [40,111]). Therefore, in addition to the question “whose responsibility”, the search for responsibility in tourism should ask “who are we responsible to” in sustainable tourism development.

Obviously, the needs of people and the tourism industry are not necessarily conflicting but as Ringer ([95], p. 9) has indicated, tourism is an industry “that satisfies the commercial imperatives of an international business, yet rarely addresses local development needs”. Thus, as noted above, tourism-led economic growth does not necessarily translate into benefits for the people and their environment. Therefore, the order of preference between serving and sustaining resources for people and the tourism industry should be clear and in logical relation to the idea of sustainable development. Tourism can be a potential and fruitful tool for sustainable development but it may not always be the most favorable use of resources in specific locations (see [87,109,112]) and locally “sustainable tourism” may in practice be unsustainable globally and/or locally in the long term.

It is obvious that “the source of the rule” [113] in setting the code of conduct for, and limits to, sustainable tourism is mainly the industry itself. In that self-organizing context, however, the search for responsibility in tourism has demonstrated “a market failure”, indicating that an external intervention may be urgently needed. According to many previous studies, the demand for environmentally-friendly products has not yet materialized substantially enough and the industry’s progress in sustainable tourism beyond tourism-centric and economic criteria has been relatively slow. Thus, the ongoing new governance that is hollowing out state responsibility and emphasizing corporate, non-governmental or citizen (customer) responsibilities (see [114]) does not seem to be working (fast enough) for sustainable development in tourism. Therefore, in order to have tools for setting the limits to growth in tourism in a local-global nexus with less tourism-centric evaluation criteria, stronger governmental and inter-governmental policies and regulations are most probably needed (see [115]). The governance of sustainable tourism should also implement future costs (see [116,117]) to present day evaluations and

see beyond short-term economic prospects. This is a challenging but unavoidable task if the tourism industry aims to be guided towards sustainability.

#### 4.2. Concluding Remarks

To summarize, while there are major challenges in sustainable tourism as a concept and development tool in practice, the calls for forgetting the idea may be premature. Instead of going beyond sustainability in tourism, there may be a real need to take serious steps back towards the original ideas of sustainable development. Therefore, the re-framing of sustainable tourism as a less tourism-centric activity operating in a local-global nexus is vital. Sustainability is a crucial element for the future of tourism and this re-framing would make it a critical tool and dimension for the evaluations of the limits to growth in tourism with strong references to evolving discussions on ethical components in tourism (see [118–120]).

The ethical element in sustainable tourism development is built upon both theory and practice. This means that the industry would need to change and reconsider its position in development discourse if it really is aiming to promote sustainable development in tourism beyond rhetoric and “green washing”. However, to expect the industry as a private sector economic actor to substantially share its benefits, and decentralize its own role and position in its own operations may not be realistic. As Scheyvens [121] has critically asked in the context of tourism and poverty alleviation: why should we assume that the tourism industry has some ethical commitment to ensuring that their operations contribute to the alleviation of poverty (see also [122])? While there are individual companies doing well in this respect, a large majority seem to continue to operate along the activity-based limits to growth. Therefore, the industry as a whole and its customers need to have firmer guiding regulative frameworks for creating a wider responsibility and a path towards sustainable development. Obviously, this is easier said than done, which is evident in the global scale regulative processes such as the Kyoto Protocol, for example. However, the first step is to recognize the need for re-framing sustainability in tourism: after that, the operationalization of firmer regulative frameworks is definitely easier to process than under the current hegemonic idea of sustainable tourism as a local-scale and self-organized industry-oriented development issue focusing on short-term economic prospects.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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