

## What Is This 'Host Community' That Tourism Scholars Keep Talking About?

By Stephen Schweinsberg, Po-Hsin Lai and Stephen Wearing

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the global travel industry. International border closures and passenger concerns over possible infection have threatened the economic viability of many dominant players in the aviation, hotel other service sectors (Foo, Chin, Tan, & Phuah, 2020).

Since the pandemic began academics have debated what a '*new normal*' for tourism after the pandemic should look like. Some, for example, have argued that host communities should have a more prominent voice in future sustainable tourism planning (e.g. Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020a).

However, little attention has been given to the host community's actual perspective. Perhaps more importantly, **why does a local community sometimes act in ways that either discourage or encourage tourism development in a manner that goes against what academics, governments and tourism industry professional recommend?**

...

### **"Community" is Diverse**

A community can be defined as "a group of people who share common culture, values and/ or interests based on social identity and/ or territory, and who have some means of recognising and (inter)acting upon these commonalities" (Anon, 2009). In 2020 we published a paper in [Tourism Geographies](#) where we discussed how heterogeneous host tourism communities exist in a space that is both *imagined* and *lived*. The imagined space of a community includes how the value and use of land is perceived by differently by dominant local stakeholder groups.

In all communities, local space is always contested to some degree among different stakeholder groups. Over time, the perspectives of different groups fall in and out of favour. This is because:

*"what constitutes capitalist driven abstract space is ever absolute; any form of production must be constantly re-assessed on the basis of its social relations"* (Wearing et al. 2016, p. 111).

Thus, in the real world of communities, few things are fixed. There is a constant re-evaluation of geographic space based on ever changing social relationships within and beyond the community. How a community is *imagined* changes over time as different sets of values and interests become dominant.

Unfortunately, however, when academic commentators and policy makers talk of a 'community' they often do so from the perspective that it is a uniform entity. As the tourism industry responds to the effects of COVID-19 and before this Overtourism there is also often an implicit assumption that a 'community' is being exploited and oppressed by global capitalism. A number of scholars have therefore argued that the COVID-19 offers an opportunity for a community focussed re-set of tourism's growth trajectory (Higgins-Desbiolles, Carnicelli, Krolikowski, Wijesinghe, & Boluk, 2019; Tremblay-Huet, 2020).

### **Community Diversity and Resilience**

Sharma et al. (2021) recently suggested that the resilience of the tourism industry to an event like COVID-19 will involve a complex interplay of forces including: a response from government, technological innovation; consumer and employee confidence and local belongingness. Whilst acknowledging that it is essential to place the community's needs at the centre of the industry's recovery; the reality is, however, that stakeholder power seldom resides in the hands of more marginalised groups.

As the world moves into a COVID-19 recovery phase, many countries are realizing that indigenous communities, for example, have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic due to higher levels of underlying health problems and a lack of access to health care services. In addition the high reliance on migrant workforces in destinations like New Zealand's Queenstown (the nation's adventure tourism capital) is causing difficulties owing to the national lockdowns and the associated inability for non-citizens to access various financial and other forms of government support.

...

### **Stakeholder Power and Tourism's Recovery**

The challenge for tourism developers and planners going forwards is to find ways to reconcile different and competing stakeholder understandings of how destination space should be used and managed. Frisvoll (2012) argued that stakeholder power manifests itself in tourism space through the interplay of:

- the powers inherent in laws and regulation;
- the power that people have through the ownership of property and usufruct (the right to use land owned by someone else, including the government), and;
- the power derived from the personal goals and aspirations of inhabitants.

How these different forms of stakeholder power relate will vary from tourism destination to tourism destination. For instance, in Australia COVID-19 has generated debates over the power of Commonwealth and State government policy makers to enforce health restrictions that impinge on the "right to travel". These policies also, by implication, are limitations on the "rights" of service industries to economically benefit from travel (Gostin & Chertoff, 2021).

The Canadian Government has justified a ban on cruise ship visitors to Canada's Arctic communities since March 2019 until at least February 2022 on the basis of the risks posed to the health of the region's indigenous communities. The decision to ban large scale tourism in vulnerable indigenous communities is laudable from a public health perspective. However, the decision has had a substantial impact on local Arctic economies.

On the one hand indigenous Arctic communities are certainly highly susceptible to introduced diseases. On the other hand they often have limited resources to cope and self-sustain their economic systems.

...

### **A Path Forwards**

With tourism industry's stakeholders needing to work together to ensure the long term resilience of the industry; academics must begin to consider what it is in the tourism space that lends a particular stakeholder group(s) the social legitimacy to exercise agency and power over others? Tourism

stakeholders will often differ with respect to not only their desired futures, but also over the path to achieving that future, and the rights of certain stakeholder groups to have a say in what the future in the short and long-term should be (e.g. Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020b).

An important component of establishing legitimacy in a contested tourism setting is a stakeholder(s) ability to see the totality of tourism's local circumstance (Wearing, Schweinsberg, & Tower, 2016) and to establish empathy with other often disparate stakeholder groups. Recognising that, even if just for purely altruistic reasons, all stakeholders desire a sustainable future for their industry. Because of this we must think carefully about what sustainable leadership will look like in a post COVID-19 world.

Schweinsberg et al. (2018) have argued that sustainable leadership is less about the exercising of top-down authority and more about enabling others to make positive shifts in their own existence towards a more sustainable existence. If we are to empower communities in this way we must engage with totality of their existence, which should include a recognition of the evolving and multifaceted space they inhabit. Frameworks of space like that, which was articulated by Schweinsberg et al. (2020) represent one example of how this might be achieved.

## References

- Anon. (2009). Community. In D. Gregory, R. J. Johnston, G. Pratt, M. Watts, & S. Whatmore (Eds.), *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (4th ed., pp. 103-104). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Foo, L.-P., Chin, M.-Y., Tan, K.-L., & Phuah, K.-T. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on tourism industry in Malaysia. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 1-5.
- Frisvoll, S. (2012). Power in the Production of Spaces Transformed by Tourism. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 28, 447-457.
- Gostin, L., & Chertoff, M. (2021). Lockdowns, Quarantines, And Travel Restrictions, During COVID And Beyond: What's The Law, And How Should We Decide? Retrieved from <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20210322.450239/full/>
- Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2020a). Socialising tourism for social and ecological justice after COVID-19. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 610-623.
- Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2020b). The "war over tourism": challenges to sustainable tourism in the tourism academy after COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 1-19.
- Higgins-Desbiolles, F., Carnicelli, S., Krolikowski, C., Wijesinghe, G., & Boluk, K. (2019). Degrowing tourism: rethinking tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 1-19.
- Schweinsberg, S., Heizmann, H., Darcy, S., Wearing, S., & Djolic, M. (2018). Establishing academic leadership praxis in sustainable tourism: lessons from the past and bridges to the future. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 26(9), 1577-1586.
- Schweinsberg, S., Wearing, S., & Lai, P.-H. (2020). Host communities and last chance tourism. *Tourism Geographies*, 1-18.
- Sharma, G. D., Thomas, A., & Paul, J. (2021). Reviving tourism industry post-COVID-19: A resilience-based framework. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 37, 100786.
- Tremblay-Huet, S. (2020). COVID-19 leads to a new context for the "right to tourism": a reset of tourists' perspectives on space appropriation is needed. *Tourism Geographies*, 1-4.
- Wearing, S., Schweinsberg, S., & Tower, J. (2016). *The Marketing of National Parks for Sustainable Tourism*. Clevedon: Channel View.

### **About the Authors**

**Dr Stephen Schweinsberg** is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney. His research has explored aspects of leadership for sustainable tourism, tourism's place based setting and tourism development in national parks.

**Dr Stephen Wearing** is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Technology Sydney. He has conducted numerous projects and lectures worldwide and is the author of 17 books and over 200 articles dealing with issues surrounding leisure, community development and sustainable tourism.

**Dr Po-Hsin** Lai is a Lecturer in Newcastle Business School at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research focuses on the dynamic processes of place meanings and landscape representations and implications for relevant stakeholders in the context of change driven by resource use activities such as tourism, outdoor recreation, mining and urban sprawl primarily in rural environments and protected areas.