Screaming in Silence: Seeking Sustainable Tourism in Island Societies

Prof. Dr. Ryan R. Peterson
University of Aruba
J. E. Irausquinplein 4, PO Box 5
Oranjestad, Aruba
Tel: (00-297) 582-3901
E-mail: management@fhtms.org

ABSTRACT
Despite the significance and growth of tourism in the Caribbean, ontologies and epistemologies of sustainable tourism in island societies remain fragmented, fragile, fleeting and fatalistic. In a review of, and reflecting on the classical canons of tourism, sustainable tourism, and islands, within contemporary Caribbean island societies, this paper contends that our current scientific modes, models and methods are unsuitable and unsustainable for understanding sustainable tourism in island societies, let alone, guiding scholars and policy makers in pursuit of sustainable tourism. This paper questions the scientific status quo, and calls for a new discourse on sustainable tourism from within island societies.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
J.4 Social and Behavioral Sciences: Economics, Sociology, Psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

“This is my island in the sun, where my people have toiled since time began; I may sail many a sea, but her shores will always be home to me”
Harry Belafonte.

It is a truism that tourism plays a significant role in the global economy. According to World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), the tourism economy produced well over US$ 6,000 billion, and accounted for over 250 million jobs worldwide [67]. The tourism industry has indeed become a key sector in the world economy and a major driver of economic growth and prosperity. Yet, recent economic crisis, socio-health pandemics, and environmental disasters underscore the vulnerability and volatility of tourism.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization [66] reports that the global tourism economy GDP declined by 5% percent in 2009, causing a loss of almost 5 million jobs. Global tourism expenditures are still below 2008 averages, and the pace of recovery in 2011 is likely to be slower [67]. Different regions, including the Caribbean, experienced significant contractions in visitor arrivals and expenditures, and tourism investments have declined by almost 20% [66]. Studies indicate that tourism’s volatility has indeed increased over the past decade [67]. Nevertheless, underscoring its recovery, the WTTC predicts that the global tourism economy GDP will grow by 2% next year, creating an extra 946,000 jobs worldwide. Over the next ten years, WTTC forecasts that the global tourism economy will grow by 4% per annum [67].

Closer to home in the Caribbean, tourism and its ancillary services have permeated our socio-economic fabric, accounting for almost 15% of GDP and employing over 2 million people [67]. Ranked number one in relative contribution to Caribbean island economies and thirteenth in absolute size worldwide [67], over the past half-a-century, tourism has come to dominate much of Caribbean island realities, accounting for the highest degree of tourism specialization as measured by economic contribution [67]. It is generally regarded as the region with the highest tourism penetration and density rates [31].
Looking towards the next decade, prospects for Caribbean tourism remain relatively upbeat. Real GDP growth for the Caribbean tourism economy is expected to average 3% per annum, and the economic contribution of tourism GDP is expected to rise from US$39.4bn to US$76.3bn by 2020. In terms of earnings, tourism receipts are expected to almost double from US$23.5bn in 2010, to US$45.6bn within a decade [67].

However, and precisely due to, the legacy of tourism in the Caribbean, has institutionalized a tendency for tourism to be treated as a discrete entity, thereby eclipsing the sociopolitical and institutional context of island societies in and through which tourism unfolds [15]. While the past growth in Caribbean tourism is a platitude, its development and, more importantly, its sustainability have been questioned and critiqued for over a decade by both philosophers and practitioners [15, 17, 36].

Whereas the discussion on the differences growth and development is a long standing debate [17], the enduring scrutiny and quest for sustainable tourism in island societies does underscore the importance of (a) exploring the suitability of dominant ontological modes, epistemological models and empirical methods of tourism development and sustainable tourism, and in addition, (b) critically question their suitability and sustainability within the contemporary context of (Caribbean) island societies.

In essence, this paper echoes the observations made by Pearce & Butler [36] over a decade ago that much of the conceptual and intellectual work on sustainable tourism in island societies has not progressed much beyond the stage of shallow objectivistic reductionist lip service. The field of sustainable tourism is indeed yet to be fully supported by a systemic contextual base which takes into account the poli-institutional dynamics of contemporary complex island societies [15, 17, 22, 30, 53]. Over the past decade several authors have called for new perspectives and paradigms [4, 15, 22, 30, 41], yet these calls remain metaphorically scattered across disciplinary islands, and very much embryonic in their development.

We have reached a stage where, if island policy makers are often accused of being insufficiently pro-active and sustainable towards island tourism, then the same claim can also be legitimately leveled against island philosophers, sustainability theoreticians, and tourism researchers [14]. The current hegemony no longer represents a responsible tourism research agenda in a twenty-first century of flux and flexibility [30, 44], in which islands and multiplex island realities are disregarded, or at best, subjugated and marginalized [4, 37]. In a recent publication on new perspectives in Caribbean tourism, Daye et al. [15] rightfully conclude that:

“Normative perspectives of Caribbean tourism development, while valid and beneficial, do not take into account the ‘situatedness’ and the particular confluence of history, culture, political and economic aspirations of Caribbean postcolonial societies in the quest for competitive ascent.

As a pervasive, dominant and ever-increasing sphere of activity, there is a need for the production of indigenous knowledge on Caribbean tourism that addresses the specific realities that are unique to Caribbean countries, that may not be readily served by traditional and existing models and concepts…” [15].

Hence, this paper does not discuss the sustainability of island tourism as such, nor does it provide a ‘sustainability silver-bullet’, but questions the suitability and sustainability of the underlying, often implicit, values, beliefs and models used in tourism studies, tourism development and tourism policy. We reflect and raise some critical questions as to these axiological, ontological and epistemological doctrines [24], and deconstruct the fragmented and fatalistic dogma of sustainable island tourism [4, 60].

This paper contends that unless classical canons are questioned and contextualized, future research and policies for sustainable tourism in island societies will remain an elusive oxymoron and a guiding fiction fraught with challenges, in fact, perpetuating the unsustainability of our Caribbean island societies [15, 17, 30, 44, 60].

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The classical tenets of tourism and tourism development are summarized, and contrasted with contemporary (island) environments, followed by a discussion on traditional and emerging discussions on sustainable tourism in islands societies (Section 2). Based on the foregoing juxtaposing review of classical and contemporary perspectives, the paper reflects on the current state of affairs on sustainable tourism in island societies (Section 3), and concludes by calling for a new discourse on sustainable tourism from within Caribbean island societies (Section 4).

2. SEEKING SUSTAINABILITY

Tourism, sustainability and island societies have been scrutinized for over half-a-century by philosophers and practitioners. The amalgam of these individual reflections and recollections are beyond the scope of this paper, yet, with the exception of a few scholarly attempts [8, 15, 17, 60], a review of history reveals at least one startling conclusion, i.e., the disjoint development of separate streams of (ontological, epistemological and empirical) development on tourism, sustainability and island societies [53]. In terms of Pearce & Butler [36], there is scant evidence of ‘concept stretching’, ‘scope broadening’ and ‘cross-linkages’ within and between theoretical conceptualizations and empirical studies on tourism, sustainability and island societies.
In fact, ‘science’ and our cumulative body of knowledge on sustainable tourism in island societies has fallen victim to one of its main canons, i.e., positivist reductionism [30], leading to the conclusion that (the science of) sustainable tourism in island societies is undisciplined and unsubstantiated [22, 64]. In addition, previous attempts at inter- and trans-disciplinary conceptualizations of sustainable tourism in island societies [3, 8] are well-entrenched in universalistic and objectivist principles of ‘science’ [30], underscoring yet again a de-contextualized, a-historical, positivistic ontology and epistemology of sustainable tourism in island societies [15, 17, 44]. In a world of ‘science’, islands and islanders are therefore still ‘screaming in silence’ as they seek sustainable tourism.

In reflecting and deconstructing some of the foregoing axioms, the subsequent sections in this section discuss the classical canons of tourism and tourism development (Section 2.1.), sustainable tourism (Section 2.2.) and island societies (Section 2.3.), thereby setting the backdrop for questioning the suitability and sustainability of existing paradigms and praxis.

2.1 Tourism
It is somewhat ironic, yet paradoxical, that a paper on seeking sustainability of tourism development leads off with an introduction on tourism growth. It is clear and present testimony to the fact that these two terms are often confused and used interchangeably, in which the latter quantitative focus on tourism growth has been hegemonic in tourism studies. Whereas growth describes a quantitative increase in physical size or scale, development describes the qualitative improvement or transformative unfolding of potentialities [17].

Tourism can grow without developing, develop without growing, or do both or neither. The former focus has, however, been dominant in both tourism studies and tourism policy, as witnessed by management and measurement of tourism in terms of, e.g., number of arrivals, room capacity, number of resorts, tourism expenditures, GDP contribution, employment, and industry rates and revenues. It has permeated throughout local governments, industry associations, and international institutions such as the WTTC, UNWTO and CTO, and has consequently become the ‘way we do things around here’, and the dominant institutionalized discourse throughout the Caribbean and the world.

The question is, however, whether this quantitative reductionism captures the richness of tourism development and provides suitable direction for sustainable tourism. In addition, with the growing importance of tourism for island economies in terms of both government revenues, employment, and scarce (finite) island spaces, one also has to question the role of policy, power and politics which are intimately intertwined with the ‘riches’ and ‘righteous’ of tourism development in island societies [25, 30, 43].

Consistent with this questionable mechanistic mode, tourism is often described as a sector-specific term which is narrowly defined as the provision or enhancement of facilities and services to meet the needs of tourists [17]. Exemplary of such a reductionist interpretation is the well accepted framework for the analysis of tourism products provided by Buhalıs [10], consisting of:

- Accommodations (hotels, resorts, time-share, fractional, condominiums and other lodging facilities);
- Attractions (natural, man-made, artificial, purpose built, heritage, special events);
- Accessibility (entire transportation system comprising of routes, terminals and vehicles);
- Amenities (service and catering facilities, retailing, other tourist services);
- Available packages (pre-arranged packages by intermediaries, travel agents and tourism operators);
- Activities (all activities available at the destination and what consumers will do during their visit);
- And ancillary services (services used by tourists such as banks, telecommunications, post, newsagents, hospitals, etc.)

The aforementioned product-centric focus of tourism led Butler [11] to develop the tourism area life-cycle (TALC) model during the 1980s. The TALC model is one of the most widely used conceptual and managerial frameworks, conceptually dating back to product development and product-life-cycle models of the 1950s, and has been subject to extensive scrutiny [10]. The main utility of the TALC model is to simplify the understanding of the evolution of tourist products. In essence, the TALC model describes and explains the linear growth of tourism products and facilities, as measured by, e.g., visitor numbers, sales and resorts, through a series of path-dependent deterministic stages from introduction to growth, to maturity and decline [11].

The question is, however, whether this linear deterministic model reflects and reveals the flexibility and flux of hyper-tourism in the 21st century, and provides suitable direction for sustainable tourism. Moreover, does product-centricity capture the intricacies, idiosyncrasies and interdependencies that exist within small political-economic societies? [15, 17, 22, 42].

2.2 Sustainable Tourism
There is no other concept in recent tourism literature that has been bent and banded as much as sustainable tourism. Akin to the concept of strategy [38], sustainable tourism reflects a truly thoughtful and thorough ‘sustainability safari’ [41]. Despite numerous and comprehensive scientific, institutional, and professional contributions, sustainable tourism remains as ephemeral, contentious and controversial as when it was introduced, spanning a multiplicity of conceptualizations and interpretations, containing hundreds of different definitions, multiple indices and criteria [17, 29, 58].

Generally conceived 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, government, and host communities’, thereby seeking social equity, environmental responsibility equity, and economic viability [25], sustainable tourism has alternatively been labeled
as meaningless, ambiguous, vague, paradoxical, parochial, cliché, a mythical concept, a muddy pool, a guiding fiction, advertising jargon, a bad oxymoron, a hyperbole, and a lion’s den of semantics [17, 29, 53, 58, 59].

Indeed, with regard to the general conception of sustainable tourism, questions remain as to what is ‘current’ and what is ‘future’? Are impacts unequivocal and equitable? What exactly is being sustained, and by whom and for whom? Where, when and with what motives is sustainable tourism sought? How consistent is sustainability across space and time? [15, 30, 44, 60].

Epistemologically and oftentimes graphically reduced to a ‘3-P’ venn-diagram of economy (‘profit’), society (‘people’) and environment (‘planet’), the central tenets of sustainable tourism revolve around principles of equity and stability [15, 25]. This ontological perspective and paradigm is based on the fundamental belief and classical notions of equilibrium and continuity [38]. Yet, in a world of discontinuous change and uncertainty of socio-economic turbulence and hyper-tourism, how tenable, and more importantly, responsible is such a hegemonic paradigmatic worldview? [22, 30, 41].

Instead of assuming or attempting to maintain stability, a new emerging epistemology is based on disruption and discontinuity, where enhancing resilience to disturbances replaces the search for stability [22, 44]. Rather than assume a steady-state alignment of ‘profit’, ‘planet’ and ‘people’, contemporary hyper-competitive tourism eco-systems are in constant flux of non-alignment, in which ‘place’, ‘process’ and ‘power’ are inextricably intertwined with sustainability [5, 15, 23, 25, 44].

Beyond the traditional (technical) interpretation of the capacity to withstand and absorb stress and unexpected change [9], island resilience captures the resourcefulness of people to respond pro-actively, positively, collectively and responsibly to challenges and opportunities [4, 41] shaped by social and institutional capabilities for island innovation [53].

Questions are thus whether our current Caribbean epistemology of sustainable tourism acknowledges the complexity and dynamics of economic, social, cultural, environmental, institutional and political resources, embedded and evolving with changes in the needs, preferences and capabilities of island societies? To what extent is island resilience captured in our perspectives and discourses on sustainable tourism? And, if sustainable tourism espouses to also meet the needs of host communities, including governments, how can it ethically claim universality across time and space without considering the aspirations and values of increasingly diverse island societies? [15, 29, 22, 43].

Beyond the sustainability safari, and in an attempt to operationalize and address the elusive nature of sustainable tourism, several attempts and experiments have been undertaken to develop and test comprehensive measurement systems and metrics for sustainable tourism [56, 58, 59]. In discussing the limitations of traditional approaches of sustainable tourism, Schianetz & Kavanagh [59] indicate the necessity for complementing linear tourism models, which disregard the complex and dynamic nature of tourism, with a dynamic systems approach [22].

Pioneered by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) during the 1990s [7], the use of multiple indicators for measuring and monitoring sustainable tourism remains high on the lists of priorities and publications, leading up to an ‘index mania’ in the pursuit of an ideal set of indicators for a sustainable tourism index.

Axiomatic and exemplary of this pursuit is a study by Cherchye & Kuosmanen [13], in which the authors develop a synthetic meta-index approach, indicating:

“The need for monitoring countries’ overall performance in sustainable development (SD) is widely recognized, but the methods for aggregating vast amounts of empirical data remain rather crude. The method involves linear optimization techniques. Using this method, we construct a meta-index of SD (MISD), which combines 14 existing aggregate SD indices into a single synthesizing overall SD index.

We view this approach as a first step towards more systematic international comparisons, aimed at facilitating diffusion of the best practices and policies from the benchmark countries to the less developed world” [13].

The foregoing study reveals and exemplifies the dominant modes, models and methods within the realm of sustainability, and testifies to a positivist reductionist Western-centric hegemonic epistemology. While we may have developed multiple criteria and indicators for sustainable tourism, and replaced simple linear modeling with complex dynamic modeling, several questions still abound.

Are we (still) not caught in a linear reductionist paradigm, in which deeply embedded processes and ‘places’ are reduced to a universal index, and island societies are assumed to be ‘under construction’ and labeled as ‘lesser’. More importantly, how value-free are metrics and indices of sustainable tourism? Has the means of seeking a sustainable tourism index become an end by and of itself? In fact, is the search for a sustainable tourism index truly sustainable? [15, 22, 29, 53, 60].

2.3 Sustainable Tourism in Island Societies

Echoing many of the foregoing sentiments, research on sustainable tourism in island societies remains controversial and peripheral to the mainstream. Despite a relatively long tradition in island studies dating back several decades [5, 16, 28, 61], our knowledge of islands and island development remains equally elusive and ephemeral [4, 6, 37].
Focusing on small island tourism economies (SITES), McElroy [31], building forth on McElroy & Albuquerque [32], indicates that the development of small tropical islands toward mass tourism development has threatened their sustainability, and a major cause has been inadequate (epistemological) understanding of tourism dynamics and the absence of comprehensive (methodological) measures of tourism's pervasive economic, social, and environmental impacts.

McElroy & Albuquerque [32] also review several types of small-island problems (SIPs), including, e.g.:
- general limitations, i.e., trade dependence and export concentration, declining aid and currency volatility, internal factionalism and policy impotence;
- special natural resource management problems, i.e., fragility, propensity for natural disasters, colonial history of invasive monoculture, and;
- special island difficulties of controlling tourism, i.e., mass scale, sun-lust coastal character, resort cycle dynamics, and data constraints.

Utilizing a simplified version of Butler’s [11] TALC model, the study constructs a tourism penetration index (TPI) based on (a) per capita visitor spending (economic impact), (b) daily visitor densities per 1,000 population (social impact), and (c) hotel rooms per square kilometer (environmental impact), and subsequently tests the TPI on 20 small Caribbean islands [32]. The results of the study provide a linear deterministic model of island tourism growth from embryonic towards mature saturation. This TPI thus mirrors many of the classical canons of tourism studies and sustainable tourism (see previous sections), with an additional intriguing (ontological) question “whether islands are a useful category of analysis and whether small size matters” [31].

### 2.4 Islands on the Edge

Beyond discussions and discourses on (sustainable) tourism, and more specifically within the relatively unconnected scientific realm of ‘island studies’, there is a long standing recognition of the ‘special’ challenges of island states in terms of their viability and vulnerability [4, 5, 6, 8, 19, 20, 63], in which the limited scale of islands is viewed as a (negative) deterministic condition for (un-) sustainability and (limited) growth [33].

The United Nations classifies over fifty countries as ‘SIDS’ – Small Island Developing States –, and characterizes this group of islands by, e.g., small (geological) size, globally isolated, limited resources, high vulnerability to natural hazards, low diversification, dependence on international trade, high transportation costs, poor public administration, expensive infrastructure, and limited economies of scale [33]. Consequently, SIDS are perceived and labeled as economically volatile, socially vulnerable and environmentally fragile, which often induces a fatalistic SIDS-stigma of ‘Small, Isolated, Dependent State (-of-mind)’ [4, 53, 60].

Beyond size and geology, ‘islandness’ – described as the tacit sociopolitical and institutional qualities and capabilities of islands [4, 26, 41] – is often considered a source of significant and insurmountable disadvantage in terms of economic growth and sustainability [7, 55]. It reinforces a ‘Calimero complex’ of island nations, emphasizing their weaknesses, disabilities, limitations, constraints and inherently vulnerable state of affairs and an ‘island state of mind’ [53].

This deficiency-based discourse is prominently present and contemporary literature continues to explore the perennial problems of islands [9] as witnessed by enduring questions such as: How can small islands survive economically? What are the limitations of small scale? How can islands defend themselves?

For instance, Royle [57] concludes:

“their size and scale make them problematic in physical terms for human occupation. Island people are faced with numerous constraints. Small islands, bounded spaces, are limited in size, in land area, in resources, in economic and population potential, and in political power. There are few, if any, benefits from being small. Usually being small is simply and obviously a predicament” [57].

In similar vein, Briguglio et al. [9] conclude:

“unlike larger states, small ones can never take their viability for granted, and they are in a perpetual sink or swim situation. Because of their intrinsic economic vulnerabilities, many SIDS may not have survived as independent states in the absence of ‘artificial’ props”.

The dominant ontology and epistemology of contemporary island studies thus conjectures a negative impact of ‘islandness’ and inherent vulnerabilities on economic growth [9, 55], leading Baldacchino [4] to conclude that the hypothesized disabilities of island societies seem to be so structurally rooted and so comprehensive that there appears to be very little room for optimism.

Empirical evidence, however, remains scarce and contradictory, and in fact, indicates that on average, small(er) (island) states outperform large(r) (continental) countries [2, 6, 20, 63], leading to a seemingly islandness paradox, i.e., despite their size, scale and other ‘special’ traits, small (island) states perform above average [9], as witnessed by for instance ‘Singapore’s serendipity’, ‘Malta’s march’, the ‘Mauritius miracle’ and ‘Aruba’s ascent’ [53].
We must ponder the question whether it is indeed a matter of ‘despite’, rather than, ‘due to’ their size and scale that islands have the inherent opportunity to seize opportunity for building resilience in light of change and transformation. Is sustainable island development really paradoxical, or have we simply subjugated and marginalized our ontological and epistemological models of islands and islandness? [53].

As we awaken and face new global and island realities, these age-old questions and perennial problems of viability, volatility, and vulnerability are rekindled, as islands find themselves at the throes of an increasingly more turbulent and less sustainable environment. Indeed, towards the latter part of the 20th century, island studies were strongly influenced by several international and regional institutions, including the UN, ECLAC and CARICOM, and their individual and collective work on the vulnerability of SIDS within the context of globalization [7, 63]. The collective tenure of these studies was geared at measuring the vulnerable state of SIDS, and developing a comprehensive economic vulnerability index [9].

This long-standing stream of empirical work on the construction of an economic vulnerability index [7, 65] is based on the premise that an island’s proneness to exogenous shocks stems from a number of inherent island economic features. Briguglio et al. [9] identify the main determinants of economic vulnerability as (a) economic openness, (b) export concentration, and (c) dependence on strategic imports, and yield evidence that (small) island states are on average more vulnerable.

Nevertheless, against this de-contextualized, static and reductionist index of island vulnerabilities, several scholars [4, 15, 30] lament the hegemony to view island states against models of development which are rooted in the practices of large industrialized countries, especially by island policy makers and scholars who, stealthily accept these models as benchmarks and ‘best practices’, without critically questioning the basic epistemological and ontological foundations, thereby imposing, in terms of Foucault, ‘totalizing theories’ and institutionalizing ‘regimes of truth’.

To compound matters, sustainable tourism is viewed as a rational and technical matter, envisioned in an a-contextual (a-political) manner, in which islands are framed from within a marginalized, vulnerable, value-free, deficiency-based perspective [4, 15, 44]. Yet, island ‘realities’ are actively constructed, socially shaped and influenced by actor locality and value specificity [15, 37].

Sustainable tourism in island perspective is thus a socially constructed phenomenon that is constantly and dynamically reframed, reinterpreted and reconstructed. Reality is socially constructed and all scientific knowledge is always socially situated. This essentially constructivist perspective is, however, yet to be fully acknowledged and explored by island scholars and empirical studies on sustainability and tourism development [30, 48].

Within a globalized context of tectonic transformations and contested local island ‘spaces’, reliance on existing paradigms and praxis of ‘continuity’ and ‘consonance’ is proving to be extremely problematic for explaining current and future tourism processes and systems in island societies [30, 44]. More importantly, it has proven to be unsustainable and self-destructive for island societies [53]. The vulnerability of this hegemonic ‘small isolated dependent state of affairs’ begets a deeper reflective discourse, and phenomenological interrogation of sustainable tourism in island societies [12, 53, 62].

In the absence of suitable analysis of the ontology and epistemology of the multiplicity of politically-laden dynamic stakes in sustainable tourism in island societies [53], the existing analysis on the possibilities and processes for sustainability perpetuate an insidious bias against island societies. Consequently, the status quo continues to ignore the lessons from the enduring observations on the complexity of Caribbean island ontology, i.e., emergent from unique yet systemic ‘global and local’, ‘structural and institutional’ ‘plantation and post colonial’, ‘processes and forces’ - and the related critiques of Caribbean’s epistemology [35].

By continuing to fail to reflect on and capture the nuanced character and capabilities of Caribbean islandness of agency, adaptation and agility, and therein island qualities for resourcefulness and resilience, these classical paradigms for sustainable tourism in island societies threaten to leave the depth of the Caribbean’s’ island potentials and values in a state of ephemeral marginalization on the edge. There is, in fact, increasing evidence that islandness is not a liability by definition, and not all islands are created equally [6, 20, 42]. Herein we encounter our key challenge - and contribution - to move paradigms and praxis beyond current boundaries of imagination, investigation and innovation.

Along the lines of growing critique of past and present Caribbean (tourism) ontology and epistemology [12, 15, 17, 23, 30, 34, 53, 56], securing sustainability, and beyond, requires scientific emancipation from objectivist, Western-centric, static, reductionistic, deterministic paradigms and praxis, in order to
After almost half-a-century of tourism experiences, more importantly, explain the constructivist and contextual nature of dynamic and complex relationships between (hyper) tourism, (dynamic) sustainability, (complex) island societies, in which ‘discontinuities’, ‘dissonances’ and ‘discourses’ take center stage.

Island spaces of sustainable tourism are not physically nor objectively constructed, but more importantly, socially constructed through inter-subjective sense-making and sense-giving processes. Meanings to sustainable tourism thus are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed depending on time and space, location and position [54]. This paradigm shift operates within the context of contextualization in which sustainable tourism is not set within a disciplinary model, but transcends disciplinary (academic) structures - transdisciplinarity - in which knowledge emerges from a particular island context, with its own distinct theoretical features, research methods and modes of practice [64].

Essentially, a critical phenomenological interrogation of sustainable tourism in contemporary island societies is called for, in which the contextually embedded nature, the multiplicity of socially constructed meanings, and the tacitly contested values of sustainable tourism are understood from within islands [53]. Unlike classical positivistic studies on sustainable tourism in island societies, phenomenological studies acknowledge the multiple explicit and implicit realities that exist in socio-politically experientially embedded networks, and dynamically diffuse stakeholder intra- and interrelationships [18, 30, 54].

Ontologically, sustainable tourism is seen as relativist (not objectivist), seeking to understand the identities of, the meanings attributed by, and the experiences of different actors and institutional agents, against a backdrop of competing perspectives on island sustainability within a global setting [54]. Sustainable tourism in island societies is thus viewed as a value-laden construct, in which dissonance and creative deconstruction are intimately intertwined. Herein multiple perspectives and realities exist, including that of the researcher, in which there is no privileging position, and social realities are actively constructed by means of social interactions and symbolic discourses [54]. The epistemology and ontology of islandness is thus endemic to unraveling the riddling nature of sustainable tourism in island societies [41].

Discourses on islands are shifting and maturing slowly as we dive deeper beneath the surface of superficial deficiency-based questions and simplistic deterministic assumptions and ‘sink-or-swim’ assertions, and also ask ourselves, e.g.: What are the strengths of islands? How can island nations thrive on turbulence? What are the systemic characteristics and capabilities of ‘islandness’? How do islands build resilience and develop strategic flexibility and requisite agility? What is the role of governance and other institutional capabilities for island innovation? More fundamentally, how do we reach outward and stretch inward as we rethink and retexualize a new emerging Caribbean ontology and epistemology of sustainable tourism in island societies? How do we build Caribbean (tourism) scholarship that is ‘true’ and ‘truthful’ to our island(nes)s today and tomorrow?

Beyond new perspectives, we need a new discourse to further the development of suitable and sustainable modes, models and methodologies for sustainable tourism in the Caribbean island societies. Islands are indeed sites of innovative conceptualizations, whether nature or human enterprise, whether virtual or real, whether philosophical or empirical [4]. As islands ‘on the edge’, we have always been the harbinger of resilience and new discoveries. In the spirit of John F. Kennedy and Albert Einstein, ‘our problems are man-made and can thus be solved by mankind, if and when we recognize that we cannot solve our problems at the same level at which we created them’.

The sustainability of island tourism depends on embracing the turbulence of tourism, the paradox of sustainability, and the duality of islandness. It requires a higher state of ‘nirvana’ and reflexivity to manage the inherent tension and confusion of multiple spheres, stakes and spaces, in which the past and the future co-exist in the present through creative and intelligent transformation.
Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis, we must redeem ourselves, and see beyond the epistemological and ontological confines of the past and the present to proactively construct sustainable island futures. In true Caribbean nature, we must ‘emancipate ourselves from mental slavery’.

5. REFERENCES


