

Ensuring the sustainability of sustainable tourism

 By [Danny Bryer](#)

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Sustainable tourism, the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) theme for 2017, marked a point in history for the tourism sector. Some businesses grappled with the concept for the first time, while others have constructed an entire business ecosystem on its principles. Too often, however, sustainability is viewed as just one silo of business development, while the truth is that, in isolation, any measures geared towards sustainability are doomed.



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As one of the Western Cape's larger hospitality concerns, this was brought home by the recent (and ongoing) water crisis. In a cruel reverse of the little boy plugging the leak in the dyke with his thumb, we have been attempting to make sure that water levels in the dams and in other alternative sources are restored and accessible. It became clear early on that we were doing too little, too late, however, the Cape has successfully reduced its daily water consumption by over 50% in a little over one year.

A holistic take on sustainability

According to the UNWTO, sustainable tourism is that which relates to the current and future economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities. If one domino topples, the others soon follow. For example, if the environment is suffering, the economy takes a knock as tourism drops off, and then the attendant job losses in the industry affect communities. For us as South Africans, industry transformation and inclusivity is to be included in the concept of sustainability at all times. This has become painfully true for tourism SMEs in particular, those unable to leverage business partnerships have stumbled at this time and many have gone under.

It's a little meta, but our role as tourism professionals is to ensure the sustainability of sustainable tourism. That is, we're to ensure that all of the principles are built into the foundations of what we're doing and that every strategy we have for business growth and development recognises this and sees it becoming a meaningful reality. It means that we can no longer simply come up with an individual business plan and expect it to have any kind of longevity: your business plans must incorporate partnerships, mentorships, skills development, transformation, inclusivity and collaboration.

How can this be realised when we're operating in a competitive environment? The truth is, a competitive environment is better than no environment at all. Also, every business has its unique appeal, with slight differences in USPs, value-adds, and products and services. If the industry as a whole is able to sustain growth, then, in theory, individual businesses will enjoy this continued growth.

It's an insular approach to carry on doing the same thing expecting different results. Progressive, visionary companies will look to expansion, whether that means locally or internationally, and, again, having a sustainable approach to this expansion that sees a business model that can be reproduced in different contexts, is what will allow for ongoing success.

Sustainable business models

Take a closer look at host communities: is your company optimising its approach to working within communities? This can mean anything from training and employing locals to making use of local businesses in supply chains. For international companies, this is essential. You can't simply import your workforce, there must be an inclusive approach that sees local communities benefiting from your presence in their city, town or country. This also creates the imperative to have a sustainable business model, lest your business should fail due to any number of reasons, resulting in a knock-on disaster for extended families relying on your existence.

Bear in mind that from among communities, there can come ingenious solutions to hyper-local problems and that their context gives them unique insights into what works and what doesn't – a further facet to sustainability is in being able to adapt to environmental anomalies – not just access to water, for example, but the business and social climate within which one operates.

It's fairly obvious that the economy as a concept does not rely on any individual business, it's the sum of its parts, seen and unseen, but even something as abstract as the economy relies on the concerted efforts of individuals and individual businesses in achieving sustainability.

Finally: the needs of visitors. Visitors to destinations have expectations, demands and preferences. Trying to shoehorn those into your own idea of how they should experience a destination will alienate them. You can guide them should they need to adapt along with you to some crisis, as we have done in the Western Cape, but you can't guarantee that they'll return. Ensuring a powerful, memorable visitor experience is what will drive ongoing success in tourism. Listen to your markets and respond accordingly.

The joy of tourism is that it's never the same twice – you can visit a city, but if you return in ten years' time, that destination would be quite different. Our task is to ensure that not only are there still destinations to visit in the future, but that these destinations will be enhanced and improved to provide even more reasons to visit again.

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