Tourist practices in the circular economy

Sørensen, Flemming; Bærenholdt, Jørgen Ole; Greve, Kim Andreas Gjetting Møller

Publication date:
2018

Citation for published version (APA):
Tourist Practices in the Circular Economy

Flemming Sørensen
Department of Social Sciences and Business, Flemmiso@ruc.dk, business studies

Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt
Department of People and Technology, job@ruc.dk, human geography

Kim Andreas Gjetting Møller Greve
Department of People and Technology, kagmg@ruc.dk, business studies and performance design

All at ROSKILDE UNIVERSITY, funded by the university’s CIRCLES centre.

Introduction
Tourism is a major economic activity globally. Due to its importance, sustainable transformations must include tourism, and sustainable development of tourism can provide a central contribution to the transformation of societies, as argued by UNWTO (2017). However, the idea that tourism should become environmentally sustainable increasingly appears as wishful thinking while everybody seems to accept the growth of tourism as given.

Circular economy (CE) theory suggests a more practical business- and solution-oriented approach to sustainability issues. However, only a limited amount of research about CE in a tourism perspective exists. Tourism oriented CE research focuses, like CE research in general, on the supplier side and on how tourism suppliers may adopt and apply CE production principles. However, tourists are important (co-) producers of tourism experiences and play an active and integrated role in the tourism system (e.g. Sørensen, Jensen & Hagedorn, 2018; Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen & Urry, 2004). Thus, tourists may also play a central role for developing circular economy tourism (CET). In this paper, we focus on the role of tourists and attempt to identify potential tourist practices (Bispo, 2016) that support CET (henceforth referred to as CET tourist practices). Hence, the focus is not on innovation in products but on innovations in what people do (Pantzar & Shove, 2010; Shove & Walker, 2010).

Theoretical frame
CE refers to a restorative economy based on renewable energy and non-toxic renewable resources. It aims to limit waste by recycling used products, components and resources and by keeping products, components and resources in use longer (Macarthur, 2013). Tourism has traditionally functioned according to the linear “take-make-dispose” model (Girrard & Nocca, 2017; Manniche et al, 2017). Tourism leaves an environmental impact due to waste from production and consumption because, for example, it implies travel between places, it typically relies on cheap and easily accessible resources, and it leaves solid waste and wastewater and cause other environmental problems (e.g. Manniche et al., 2017). However, tourism is a complex phenomenon driven largely by consumer trends, desires and needs (for example for visiting distant destinations) and it involves a number of different complementary and competing sectors, public and private. Thus, setting up a CE system of consumption and production in tourism is not straightforward, if possible. Nevertheless, from a theoretical perspective three approaches to CET are possible:
First, tourism involves a number of actors (private, public and voluntary) producing different tourism products and services. These actors may apply, individually and cooperatively, CE principles of production. Second, existing, new and developing economic logics of product ownership may facilitate CET. In Sharing Economy, idle resources are shared among users limiting the need for resources put into the system. Sharing Economy accommodation models, for example, are estimated to lead to 0-30% less waste, 50% less water use, 80% less energy use, 90% less CO2 emission than hotel accommodation (Ten Wolde A., 2016 in Girard & Nocca, 2017). Third, as discussed in the following, different types of tourist practices may support and facilitate CET to different degrees. Thus, a simple CET model or framework could look like illustrated in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Circular economy tourism](image)

In Practice Theory, Warde (2005), for example, perceives practices to be temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of behaviours that include practical activities, performances, and representations or talk. Practices can be routinized ways in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects treated, things described and the world understood (Reckwitz, 2002: 250). In a tourism perspective, tourist practices can be perceived practical (temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed) activities of tourism resource integration (c.f. Grönroos & Voima, 2013), i.e. selecting, combining, using, and interacting with tourism resources, that aim to create experience value.

Pantzar & Shove (2010) suggest how *material* (e.g. things), *skill* (e.g. bodily knowledge or competence), and *image* (e.g. mental activities, especially symbolic meaning) frame practice. This provides a simple framework for understanding tourist practices, how and why such practices develop and change. In the tourism context, *material* relevant for tourist practices can include all types of goods and services that tourists depend on. *Skill* (or competence or knowledge) refers, for example, to knowledge of different tourism material, how to use and combine it. *Image* (or meaning) may concern symbols and images of different tourist products, services, holiday types, destinations and experiences.

In the following, we attempt to identify which tourist practices support CET, now and in the future, and the drivers and barriers of such practices.

**Method**

The method employed consisted of a Delphi study through which we aimed to identify opinions regarding 1) the characteristics of existing and 2) future CET tourist practices, as well as 3) barriers and 4) potential drivers for the development of such practices. The Delphi study involved a panel of tourism experts consisting of industry representatives, other tourism experts (e.g. organisational leaders) and opinion makers (e.g. bloggers). The Delphi study consisted of two rounds of interviews. In the first round, open-ended answers were collected (18 respondents). The answers were condensed into different categories for each of the four questions. In the second interview
round the same experts were asked to select the five most important categories in each topic and rank these (13 respondents).

Findings and conclusions
The answers retrieved in the Delphi study resulted in a number of interesting findings.

First, the experts’ answers were highly varied. Some experts referred to different overall tourism practices, for example particular holiday types such as nature tourism, active holidays (e.g. cycling and hiking), and staycation. Others suggested different practices related to the use of specific products, for example using CO₂ neutral accommodation and sharing platforms, and other practices such as renting instead of owning equipment, and tourists’ waste handling.

Second, there was also little consensus among the experts when ranking the different categories, in any of the four themes. For example, none of the categories was voted to be among the five most important by all respondents. Nevertheless, the overall highest ranked current trends include practices of using sharing platforms, and active (e.g. cycling and hiking) holidays, as well as staycation. Concerning the highest ranked future practices, these include the use of more sustainable transport (e.g. trains instead of planes), the use of sharing platforms, and tourists’ minimization of food waste.

Third, the suggested barriers and drivers of CET tourist practices, and those ranked as the most important include barriers associated with tourists’ conscienceknowledge (skills) of CET and their perceptions (or images) of tourism, tourism policies framing conditions for developing CET, and the industry’s responsibilities of providing CET products (available material). For example, tourists’ developing conscience of sustainability issues in relation to tourism is seen as a potential future driver, as is optimization of energy systems in the sector, policy initiatives supporting train travel, as well as supporting political frame conditions. Concerning the highest ranked barriers, these include the (low) price of plane travel, lack of political initiatives supporting CE innovation and increasing amounts of tourists globally for whom tourism is primarily a hedonic activity.

Fourth, some of the suggestions received from the experts do not seem clearly to support CET. This concerns for example suggestions for practices of local hood tourism and of moving away from city centers (which we assume would imply more transportation). In addition, because tourism as a system involves many different actors and practices, a practice that may be CET friendly seen isolated may not result in composite CET friendly practices. For example, the top ranked current trend (and the second most important future trend), using Sharing Economy platforms (for example Airbnb), is often assumed to cause more plane travel, thus it does not (currently) result in a composite travel practice that is CET friendly. However, combined with more CE friendly transportation forms, for example trains (top ranked future trend), composite practices involving sharing platform practices may support CET in the future.

Fifth, though the themes and suggestions retrieved focus on identifying current and future trends of tourists’ practices, most suggestions, including those ranked highest in the second round, more or less explicitly include also the role of supplier side practices. For example, use of sharing platforms implies that sharing platforms are provided and use of sustainable means of transport implies that someone supplies these.

Thus, CET practices may be considered compound (Warde, 2013) in that different actors together impact on and shape each-others practices. The industry and policy makers have important roles in providing CET products (or material), and educating tourists to use these (skills), while the tourists through their practices, based on their images and knowledge (or skills) of CET holidays and activities, choose among possible practices and influence the practices of the industry and eventually policy makers. Importantly, because of this compound nature of CET practices, which may be particularly relevant in tourism due to the active role of tourists, a focus solely on how the
industry may develop CE production practices can only provide a one-sided picture of how CET can be developed in the future.

All in all, a pattern emerges in which sharing economy and alternative means of transport other than plane travel are considered the more important trends of CET tourist practices in addition to, and possibly combined with, different active holidays and minimization of food waste. However, no perfectly clear picture results from the analysis, because there is an apparent lack of consensus among the experts. Furthermore, the patterns suggest how both tourists, policy makers and the industry all have important roles to play for developing the compound CET practices of the future. Thus, one question that arises is if, and when, the willingness for this will develop. Currently cruise ship tourism and plane travel, for example, continue their growth because of consumer demands, policy regulations and business model innovations, while there is little evidence that technological innovations in the near future will make these types of travel correspond to a CET logic.

Thus, complexities, and sometimes paradoxes, found in this exploratory study need to be investigated further if we want to derive more complete understandings of the complexity of CET practices and how they may form as a result of the industry’s, policymakers’ and tourists’ compound practices.

References