

Back to the Future? Tourism, Place, and Sustainability¹

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Introduction

Tourism, especially rural tourism, epitomizes the problematic elements of sustainability. On the one hand, as a service industry trading on the uniqueness of a place and region, tourism is seen as more environmentally benign than industrial production, manufacturing, extractive industries, and even agriculture. When traditional resource dependent industries decline (whether due to depletion of resources, emergence of more competitive alternatives, or promulgation of environmental regulations), local communities, environmental organizations, and politicians often turn to tourism as a way to sustain the local economy. On the other hand, tourism is made possible by the same globalizing forces that put rural and small scale society at the margin spatially and economically. Tourism largely finds its market in a modern, urban, global society, which longs for a kind of experience of place associated with the rural, pastoral, and natural. The same logic of global capitalism that makes small scale society difficult to sustain, makes travel economically practical and psychologically attractive to the tourist.

The purpose of this paper is to "explore sustainability" using tourism as an example of a strategy that might be able to link the emerging global society with the fading remnants of locally-based production and consumption. Befitting a seminar format we consider this paper an opportunity to suggest some ideas that might contribute to a continuing discussion of the problem of sustainability. Thus, we explore the meaning of sustainability and its relationship to what geographers and others are calling "time-space compression" to characterize how modernity transforms space and time. Recognizing that there is a growing strain of environmental thought that locates the prospect for achieving a sustainable society in a return to a conception of dwelling-place or habitat that is thought to have been more prominent during the 19th century (Sagoff, 1992), we discuss the potential contribution of tourism to an economy which is "suited to the place" - an economy that is locally sustainable, yet integrated with the larger global society. In particular, we want to explore with this group the usefulness of a sustainability concept anchored in the concept of a "progressive" sense of place, one that is less reactionary and exclusionary (Massey, 1993). Finally, to facilitate this exploration we present a brief look at one place (Wisconsin's "Northwoods") to illustrate the ways in which a local economy has used tourism to adapt to changing conditions in a globalizing economy.

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The Search for Sustainability in the Flux of Time-Space Compression

Sustainability generally implies some sort of harmony, equilibrium, or balance between too much and not enough development. The immediate question that is evoked in a discussion of sustainability is: What should be sustained? In some forms of sustainability, equilibrium is sought between humans and nature (ecological sustainability). In other contexts, equilibrium can be thought of as social and economic, particularly between present and future generations or local and global economies. Within these differing discourses on sustainability (environmental and local versus global) there is an implied critique of modernity and Western enlightenment. However, this critique is largely suppressed because, in the absence of any clear idea of what sustainability is, we "end up relying on utilitarian, economic, and anthropocentric definitions of sustainability" (Worster, 1993, p. 153). Harvey (1996, p. 148) is particularly critical on this point noting that the literature on sustainability "is a debate about the preservation of a particular social order rather than a debate about the preservation of nature *per se*." Still, the idea of sustainability has been attractive because, as a "guiding fiction" it serves the potentially useful purpose of organizing discourse around what is otherwise a contentious conflict of world views (McCool, 1996). The important question is whether the discourse on sustainability succeeds in challenging the social conditions that work against sustainability. If sustainability is achieving equilibrium (across time and space) what, then, are the forces that promote the opposite, disequilibrium?

Disequilibrium and Time-Space Compression

Disequilibrium, whether between nature and society, present and future generations, or local and global culture, is tied one way or another to an accelerated reshaping of time-space relations that is endemic to modernity. "I think it is accurate to describe modern industrial societies as, on the whole, actively seeking disequilibrium" (Worster, 1993, p. 180). Time zones, future shock, jet lag, fax, e-mail, internet, the global village are all symptomatic of what Harvey refers to as "time-space compression," Giddens describes as "time-space distanciation," or what Marx once described as "the annihilation of space by time." For Worster (1993, pp. 178-179), "it is hard to exaggerate how far industrialism has gone in breaking down old notions of stability, community, and order" as he illustrates with this widely quoted statement by Marx:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish [this] epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away. All new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.

In its simplest formulation, time-space compression refers to exchange, movement, and communication across space. But as Massey notes, there is also an important element of power to this as the mobility of some actively weakens the mobility of others. The differential mobility associated with time-space compression strengthens the hand of capital

"against struggling local economies the world over as they compete for the favour of some investment" (Massey, 1993, p. 62). Moreover, it is not just powerful capitalists who are impacted by time-space compression; it has real meaning for the powerless, the locally constrained who lack the means to take advantage of spatial mobility, who often suffer the disruptive consequences (i.e., rapid shifts in labour). The everyday actions of consumers can exert power over distant others. As Massey points out, every time we use a private car to drive to the "regional" shopping mall, what we potentially gain in convenience and choice from time-space compression comes at the expense of environmental quality and at the expense of social groups who must depend on viable public transport and the success of neighbourhood shops and businesses.

Science itself is also a source of disequilibrium. Ecology, in particular, has moved from a view of the natural world as dominated by harmony and order to one of instability and catastrophe. Botkin argues in his ground-breaking book, *Discordant Harmonies*, that many contemporary ecologists are inclined to replace the dominant world view of equilibrium and harmony in ecology with change, disequilibrium, and chaos. Thus, Worster notes that Botkin's science leads "to a rejection of nature as a norm or standard for human civilization and to an assertion of a human right and need to give order and shape to nature" (1993, p. 151). The prospect of disharmony in nature is troublesome for radical ecologists and environmentalists who want to be able to justify moral claims for the protection of nature on the basis of ecological principles. Such a shift in thinking tends to undermine the idea of a natural economy or inherent capacity of an ecosystem, an idea that environmentalists invoked to justify stronger regulatory measures to protect the environment. "The sense of ecological whole that was once so solid and unshakable has tended, along with other ideas to melt into air." (Worster, 1993, p. 179). Ecologists want to be able to find value in nature, but disequilibrium thinking undermines the notion that there is a "balance" in nature to be protected. The distinction between what is "natural" and what is "cultural" becomes obscured.

Time-Space Compression and the Search for Sense of Place

A major feature of time-space compression is a foreboding sense of insecurity, vulnerability, and collapse. That "the sense of social space [is] imploding in upon us. . . translates into a crisis of identity. Who are we and what space/place do we belong?" asks Harvey (1996, p. 246). This leads, perhaps inevitably, to arguments that "in the middle of all this flux, one desperately needs a bit of peace and quiet: and 'place' is posed as a source of stability and an unproblematic identity" (Massey 1993, p. 63). Consequently, there is a steady stream of commentary alerting us to the force and impact of the apparent decline and homogenization of place (e.g., Kunstler, 1993). Modernity, according to Giddens (1991, p. 33), "breaks down the protective framework of small community and of tradition, replacing these with much larger, impersonal organizations. The individual feels bereft and alone in a world in which she or he lacks the psychological supports and sense of security provided by more traditional settings." Similarly, Gergen (1985, p. 215) notes that with each

new symbolic connection to the larger world "the traditional face-to-face community loses its coherence and its significance in the life of its participants. Their sense of 'belonging' is no longer only, or even primarily, rooted in the local soil." Sack (1992) argues that the condition of modernity is not so much about a decline or loss of place meanings as some (e.g., Kunstler, 1993) have interpreted it, but about a change in how meaning is created or constituted in modern, urban, global life. Sack describes time-space compression as a "thinning" of meaning brought about by the capacity of consumption to transform place. As he sees it, meaning is increasingly created in a spatially decontextualized world of mass consumption and mass communication, a world in which market forces create and transform meaning at a rapid pace. Moreover, these same forces increasingly extend into rural communities. The modern world leaves meaning "thinned-out" and detached from place. With these homogenizing forces of time-space compression, individuals are left to themselves to construct meaning and identity.

Within the context of sustainability, tourism constitutes an important economic and cultural form of the "stretching out of social relations." As a consequence of time-space compression, tourism represents, on the one hand, a major complicitous factor in the transformation of places and the thinning of meaning. On the other hand, tourism also represents a potential vehicle for the preservation of the past. The increased mobility and freedom of leisure created by modern life are important contexts for the search for meaning, yet tourism is the epitome of "consuming places" (Urry, 1996). Within tourism there is often a very deliberate and conscious effort to evoke a sense of place that, ironically, can lead to its artificial preservation in the form of "staged authenticity," "invented traditions," and "phony folk culture." In MacCannell's (1976) view, tourism is largely motivated by the desire to experience the authentic, which modernity makes increasingly inaccessible. Similarly, Jaakson (1986) suggests it is that search for constancy in a sea of change that attracts many to seek out a rural summer cottage retreat - an escape from modernity in pastoral settings. While communities often hold out the hope that tourism can sustain local economies and ways of life, there is clearly a transformational character to tourism development. Tourism, more than other forms of economic development, values and trades on the character of places. The question remains as to how much and under what circumstances tourism can balance the inevitable tension between the commodification of places and our desire to experience and live in unique "thickly" textured places.

Back to the Future: Cultivating a Sense of Place?

If the science of nature is incapable of delivering stable criteria for achieving any semblance of ecological equilibrium, if modernity continuously dislodges any psychological sense of certainty and harmony, and if time-space compression generates feelings of placelessness and inauthenticity, what recourse is there to achieve environmental and social sustainability? What is needed, Worster suggests, is "a post-materialist view of ourselves and the natural world, a view that summons back some of the lost wisdom of the past but does not depend

on a return to old discarded creeds. . . a view that acknowledges the superiority of science over superstition but also acknowledges that all scientific description is only an imperfect representation of the cosmos" (1993, p. 218). Recognizing the complexity of the universe should generate greater respect for the natural world and reduce our arrogance about human abilities to predict and control nature.

Increasingly, some environmental philosophers are suggesting that such a world view may lie in cultivating a "sense of place." They suggest we return to a mode of "dwelling in place" that is thought to have been more common in past centuries. Sagoff (1992, p. 369) describes this as relating:

the economy to the conditions of a place, which involves both adapting to and making changes in the nature environment. Those who thus enter practical harmonies with places come to value them, to care for and to appreciate them, often by having to respond to a diversity of unique conditions. To do this is to sink roots into an environment and become native to that place. These roots prevent the place from eroding into McWorld -- from becoming lost in the abstract space of global markets.

Sagoff suggests that some places survive the vagaries of global competition, not because of greater economic efficiencies, but because people treat their surroundings with affection. Places survive globalization because their cultural and social institutions and community ties are strong. Through strong community bonds, effective institutions, shared memories, and commitments that root people to a place, people can adapt to changing conditions in ways that respect nature and cultural traditions. Such affection, the theory goes, generates motivation among local residents to seek continuously some fit between nature and culture. "The task is to regard nature neither as a basis for or refuge from economic activity but as our common dwelling place and earthly home" (Sagoff, 1992, p. 329). In essence, a strong collective commitment to place is the best defence against globalization.

Originating within radical environmental thinking during the 1970s, bioregionalism is one example of a place-based philosophy for achieving sustainability. Bioregionalists mix ecological science and environmental ethics to argue that society should be organized around decentralized natural or "organic" regions. Bioregionalism emphasizes a "close linkage between ecological locale and human culture" in which humans "not only alter environments but also adapt to them" (Flores, 1994, p. 5). Where bioregionalism tends to revere small scale place on the basis of an essentialist and organic interpretation of regionalism, communitarianism argues for a radically participatory form of small scale society. As Harvey (1996, p. 179) describes it, the "virtuous relation to nature is closely tied to communitarian ideals of civic virtues." Just as time-space compression has diminished local control of the economy, the modern nation-state exercises greater authority over the polity. Communitarians such as Kemmis argue that decision making in the public sphere should depend less on a set of procedures, laws, regulations, or bureaucracies and more on human virtues and patterns of relationships -- "the set of practices which enables a common inhabiting of a place" (Kemmis, 1990, p. 122).

Within the place-based, bioregional, communitarian perspective, however, there is more than a hint of romantic, anti-modern sentiment to re-create Tönnies ideal of *gemeinschaft* (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam, 1993). Harvey (1995, p. 198) notes:

For Marxists there can be no going back, as many ecologists seem to propose, to an unmediated relation to nature (or a world built on face-to-face relations), to a pre-capitalist and communitarian world of nonscientific understandings with limited divisions of labor. The only path is to seek political, cultural, and intellectual means that 'go beyond' the mediations such as scientific knowledge, organizational efficiency, technical rationality, money, and commodity exchange, while acknowledging the significance of such mediations. The emancipatory potential of modern society, founded on alienation, must continue to be explored.

Harvey fears that bioregionalist, place, and communitarian politics hold the potential to be "exclusionary" (i.e., racist and indifferent to distant "others"). "The danger arises when such modes of thought are postulated as the sole basis of politics (in which case they become inward-looking, exclusionary, and even neo-fascistic)" (Harvey, 1996, p.199). They also emphasize an essentialist reading of local natural and cultural history; a "presumption that bioregions are given by nature or by history, rather than that they are *made* by a variety of intersecting (social and ecological) processes operating at quite different temporal and spatial scales" (Harvey, 1993, p. 202). For Harvey it is naive to believe that bioregional or decentralized communitarian societies will necessarily respect the positive enlightenment values of human diversity, democracy, freedom, justice for the "other."

In sum, though there is widespread sentiment that time-space compression leads to the search for stable place, there seems to be divergent points of view on what the future course ought to be. Sustainability, as balancing present and future capital, implies some stable essential place which Harvey sees as problematic. But for the ecologically minded, a deepening sense of place provides the possibility of recovery from the modern, industrialist model of place destruction.

Massey proposes an alternative or "progressive" view of place that tries to give credibility the human need for authenticity and rootedness, but recognizes that such sentiment need not be construed as a "gated" community. "The question is how to hold on to that notion of spatial difference, of uniqueness, even of rootedness if people want that, without it being reactionary" (Massey, 1993, p. 64). Massey argues that a place may have "a character of its own" but that it is still possible to feel it without subscribing the Heideggerian notions of essentialism and exclusivity. Places are unique, but unbounded constellations of global and local processes. She notes that "what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations articulated together at a particular locus" (1993, p. 66). Place identities often lack the singular, seamless, and coherent qualities frequently attributed to the idea of sense of place. Multiple identities can and often are both a source of richness and conflict. How should we "manage" for this "sense of place" that is widely

seen as threatened by the forces of modernity, yet increasingly contested in the everyday practice of place making? How do we hold on to Massey's "progressive sense of place"?

The Case of Rural Tourism

We are not here prepared to give a general or theoretical answer to Massey's question, but instead attempt to explore the potential of a "progressive sense of place" through the example of rural tourism and second home development. Currently we are in the midst of a three-year study of a tourism and second home use in part of Wisconsin's "Northwoods" known as the Hayward Lakes Region.

The study is guided by two methodological principles that are reflected in Massey's notion of a "progressive sense of place." First, from human ecology a method known as *progressive contextualization* advocates working upward in scale to preserve the "holistic premise that adequate understanding of problems can be gained only if they are seen as part of a complex of interacting causes and effects" and avoid "*a priori* definitions of boundaries [such as] an ecosystem or human community" (Vayda, 1983, p. 266). Thus, this method involves focusing on significant activities or people-environment interactions in specific locations and times, and then explaining these interactions by placing them within progressively wider or denser contexts. Also, consistent with the views arising in ecology that see systems as less inherently stable than once thought, progressive contextualization avoids unwarranted assumptions about the stability of units or systems. Thus, in conjunction with the progressive contextualization concept of Vayda (1983), the boundaries of the site were not set a priori, but allowed to develop from the selection of "seed" locations, namely the communities of Hayward and Cable and the Chequamegon National Forest.

Second, we specifically selected a project context that would allow us to examine a plurality of identities and the local-global interconnectedness. Plurality is examined in the context of different communities within the community. The Hayward Lakes Region contains locals who have made their living from logging and tourism, second home owners who often commute between residences in nearby urban centres, and various summer and winter tourists. The context of tourism also emphasizes the ways in which the local is partially constituted from the global (or at least the larger regional) in the form of various urban migrations associated with tourism across the seasons.

Several features made this locale attractive for the purpose of studying the formation of emotional, symbolic, and cultural place meanings and how these meanings have influenced lifestyles, choice of residence, recreation use of amenity features, perceptions of the forest environment, quality of community life, and attitudes regarding public forest management. The area exhibits a diversity of land ownership, including seasonally occupied homes, resorts, campgrounds, and private lake residences and large tracts of county and state lands, national forest lands, and native tribal lands. The natural landscape affords an abundance of recreation activities (e.g., fishing, hunting, boating, skiing, snowmobiling, and mountain biking). Some of these recreation activities

have developed associated special events that attract thousands of tourists to the region. One such event is the American Birkebeiner, the largest cross-country ski race in North America.

Although the region exhibits a generally rural character, the nearby urban centres of Chicago, Illinois (approximately 400 miles), Minneapolis, Minnesota (140 miles), and Milwaukee, Wisconsin (340 miles), significantly influence the region through tourism and seasonal home ownership. In a way, the Hayward Lakes Region is an amalgamation of traditional-rural and modern-urban lifestyles. The result is an area experiencing rapid transformations that not only affect how the local residents see the place but also how others see the place.

To understand how this blend of lifestyles and tourism came to be, it is helpful to investigate the historical trends that shaped the region. Other than the occasional French trapper, much of Wisconsin largely escaped settlement until the middle of the 19th Century. Only 3,245 non-native people lived in the state of Wisconsin as late as 1830 and many of the place names — Chippewa, Chequamegon, Namekagon — attest to the strong Native American influence on the area. By 1850, Wisconsin's growing population base consisted basically of New Englanders, those born in the Great Lakes region, and foreign immigrants. The foreign born were attracted to Wisconsin largely because of the possibility of land ownership. German and Scandinavian populations were especially attracted to Wisconsin because of the similarity of Wisconsin's topography and climate to that of their native lands. These cultural influence are still strong in the Hayward Lakes Region as demonstrated by the Birkebeiner Ski Race and certain cultural and architectural themes.

A major shift in settlement patterns and development of the region occurred with the advent of the railroad and the subsequent logging boom during the 1880's. Immense stands of white pine served as the major attraction for loggers. Not only did the trees provide good timber, they were also easy to transport through the waterways of the area. Where natural waterways did not exist, dams were built to create "flowages" large enough to float logs downstream to lumber mills and railroads. These actions had profound effects on the ecology of the area and the Native Americans whose land was flooded. By the turn of the century, most of the pine was gone and the logging industry was faced with bankruptcy. Many hardwood forests remained but these were unattractive for logging due to the difficulty of transport since hardwoods would not float down the waterways. As a result, the logging industry abandoned the cut over lands to reforestation efforts and agriculture. Local government and land developers heavily promoted agriculture in the area between 1900 and 1920, even though the land was not really suitable for large scale farming. Besides poor climate and soil conditions, the massive debris left by the logging industry made clearing the land extremely difficult.

The Hayward Lakes Region, after the dissolution of the logging industry and failed attempts at agriculture, faced economic ruin unless some other industry was developed. To fulfil this need, the communities turned toward a new industry based on tourism, outdoor recreation, resorts, and seasonal homes. Tourism began with the logging industry as it brought people to the Northwoods where they discovered the beauty

and enjoyment of the region. In fact, many of the first seasonal homes were built by logging barons, but it was not until logging and agriculture failed after the 1920's that tourism began to flourish.

Recreation and tourism in the area prior to World War II was essentially restricted to summer season and traditional activities (i.e., fishing and hunting). Since that time, there have been major changes in the recreational activities and tourist seasons. Improvements in highways and the technological innovations such as the snowmobile had significant impacts on the area and, in conjunction with skiing, expanded the tourism season to the winter. The newest activity in the Hayward Lakes region is mountain biking, which has rapidly gained in popularity and helped broaden the tourist season even further.

At one time, small rustic resorts were the driving force behind the tourism industry, but almost all of these family owned and operated resorts have disappeared and been replaced by seasonal homes and hotels. The result has been a division in the types of people who have strong ties to this place. Three major categories have emerged: (1) local residents who live and work full-time in the area; (2) tourists who visit the area for limited time periods, but may develop lasting relationships through repeat visitations; and (3) seasonal home owners who represent an unique combination of residents and tourists. While seasonal home owners are more permanent than tourists, they still use the area primarily for recreation purposes.

The Hayward Lakes Region appears to have developed a sustainable tourism industry from the ruins of cut over forest lands and failed attempts at agriculture. Whether this was a conscious effort at sustainability is arguable. Yet, in a way that reflects Sagoff's interpretation of sustainability described earlier, the Hayward Lakes Region appears to be the result of people living in a place they love, continuously striving for an economy suited to the place. The fact that they were finally successful after a century illustrates their devotion, but maybe not their intentions. The trees grew back. The farmers moved on. The tourists came to stay.

Sagoff (1992) suggests two lessons from such a history. One is that technical change and innovation overwhelms efforts to conserve or manage resources, rendering long-term planning for sustainability naive in retrospect. The other is that the problem of sustainability is not primarily a problem of relating human beings to nature (as some bioregional interpretations suggest). Rather it is a problem of relating human beings to one another. "We should look first not to economic or ecological but political theory to figure out how a diversity of human communities can survive together -- since people must trust and depend upon one another at least as much as upon natural resources and ecological systems" (Sagoff, 1992, p. 365).

Conclusion

All tourism involves commodification of heritage and nature and all tourism consumes resources, making ecological sustainability more difficult. However, if there is any advantage to tourism as a basis for sustainable society, it might well be in the kind that draws outsiders more

deeply into the community to celebrate common interests. To the extent that moderns reach across space to put down roots, build community, and come to know the 'other' (whether it is a local culture or a natural history), there is the prospect that some may come to have greater regard for diverse and distant places, people, and processes. The second home tourism in the Hayward Lakes Region has such a harmony to it. It is not based on manufactured attractions or large resorts but on experiencing the "Northwoods" -- something that both locals and itinerant visitors value. Though it is a kind of dwelling which some urbanites find easier to achieve outside of metropolitan centres (implying some disaffection for and disinterest in urban centres which may be problematic) it also connects marginal areas to the larger global world. Though it is a very modern form of escape from modernity, at least some forms of tourism also appear to create beneficial economic and social transactions between the periphery and the centre. If the result is a meaning-filled place that gives locals and visitors identity and at the same time celebrates plurality and difference, then it resembles Massey's (1993) progressive vision for sense of place.

The word *sustainability* easily conjures up an image of stability and connectivity to the past. It is not surprising then that ecologically minded critics of modernity would be drawn to a concept of place that seeks to affirm a lost art of dwelling in harmony with nature. What much of the new ecology and the new cultural geography is teaching us, however, is to re-examine our assumptions of essentialism in regionality and place, and to appreciate the ways in which landscapes, places, and regions are relational concepts, socially constructed, and dynamic. The world was never as stable as we like to imagine it. Places change and must be prepared to change. The problem of sustainability comes down to two competing issues. The first issue is who has the power to influence the course of change? There is much to be said for communitarian politics if it can give locals a stronger voice in shaping their future in the face of global processes. Yet power can also exclude. This raises the second issue of how to deepen our sense of responsibility to future generations, distant neighbours, and even strangers. The challenge of sustainability is to extend our moral regard from the familiar local and present to the less familiar future and distant, a challenge made increasingly urgent by the globalizing tendencies of modernity.

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