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# Climate change and tourism: scholars' reflections on transformative research

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## Introduction

Climate change has become a key topic of attention within the tourism industry and among tourism scholars over the last 20 years however, research has largely focused around the industry's and entrepreneurs' perceptions (Tervo-Kankare, 2019); impacts and adaptation measures in destinations (Becken et al., 2020; Demiroglu et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2019); or tourists' perceptions and travel behaviour (Becken et al., 2021). Although the need for transformative changes in societies and in the tourism system has drawn research interest (Bellato et al., 2022; Bertella, 2022; Pritchard et al., 2011) there is little discussion around the transformative nature of tourism research regarding climate change. Transformative approaches invite the researcher to reflect and critically examine their role in maintaining unsustainability or bringing change (Mertens, 2021). Epistemologically, they acknowledge the subjective character of research and point to the direction of communication of researcher's role and values. While transformative approaches acknowledge the importance of reflexivity, researchers' identities, diverse interests and power, they enable the integration of conventional and disruptive methodologies. Collaborative methods aiming to bridge the theory-practice gap, together with reflexivity, have this transformation potential through co-creation and caring (Liburd et al., 2022). With this research note, we want to draw attention to those aspects and invite discussion around climate change and tourism research and reflexivity over our scholarly role. To the knowledge of the authors, there is very little documentation and discussion on how we, tourism scholars, present, discuss and reflect on our research and our role as scholars, and more specifically around transformative climate change research.

## Methodology

During the ATLAS 2021 online conference "Tourism 21: Re-building Tourism – Continuities and Changes" we organized a special track with the theme "Engaging into meaningful research and action for climate change and tourism: the role of scholars" as part of ATLAS's Special Interest Group (SIG) on Climate Change and Tourism. A total of 20 attendees participated in the special track that was held online. The participants ranged from PhD students to full professors and were mostly affiliated with universities in Europe. The track included short 3–4-min presentations in a plenary session and an interactive workshop in smaller groups. The goal was to share knowledge

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and invite discussions and reflexivity around the role of tourism scholars and take a transformative research approach.

Three broad thematic entities were identified in the submitted abstracts which were used to form three small working groups for the second part of the special track: innovation and co-design methods, education, and adaptation and collaboration. Following the short presentations, which should end with a reflective question or statement, reflexivity was further invited and encouraged during the small group discussions. Discussions developed around the questions: “*What is relevant research for climate change and tourism for us [i.e. the researchers]?*” (reflecting on our role as researchers around climate change); “*What is relevant research around climate change for the industry, destinations, and the society?*” (invitation to step out of our shoes and reflect on what others would need from climate change research); “*How can we innovate and collaborate to develop meaningful research?*” (invitation for further reflection on how we can take earlier ideas further); “*What about our role as scholars and educators on the topic of climate change?*” (invitation to reflect on our role as scholars and also think of education in relation to research). After the small working groups, all participants came together in another closing plenary session where the main points and reflections from the small groups were discussed.

We, as authors, are not experts in the field of climate change nor were the majority of the participants. However, we are all feeling the urgency for change and a strong sense to contribute to this change. While the participants reflect just a very small part of the global tourism research community, the discussions and our post-conference reflections (as moderators) identified a number of themes that can help understand the role tourism researchers can play in the climate change debate.

## Findings and discussion

### *Collaborative research*

Stakeholders' collaboration was the aspect which was evident in several of the abstracts and presentations, reflected e.g. in co-design methods, stakeholders' collaboration, or in education taking a multiple stakeholders' perspective. It was also apparent in the group discussions around the question “what is relevant research for us” that researchers should not work in silos but instead together with industry and policymakers. As some participants put it “it does not make sense to work in isolation” or “we need to come closer to stakeholders” and we need to collaborate to do that “Start doing something altogether” (i.e. industry, scholars, students, policymakers and communities). All groups pointed out the need for researchers to act as connectors, i.e. building bridges to the industry and other stakeholders, being as inclusive as possible and considering multiple worldviews. Several scholars have commented on the gap between research and practice, especially when it comes to sustainable tourism and climate change (Scott, 2021). Although tourism research has matured and we can witness an increased interest in action research and in participatory methods, these are still limited and tourism researchers need to embrace more innovative and disruptive approaches to reimagine their role as well as the means of data collection and analysis (Ivanova et al., 2021). Loehr and Becken (2021) have also argued for the opportunities emanating from an ideological shift in tourism studies towards more emancipatory, critical, and inclusive methods of knowledge production, including learning with stakeholders. Such an understanding is gaining support among tourism scholars calling for embedded community research and critical approaches in tourism research to counteract the gap between research and practice in what is called academic activism (Hales et al., 2018). In research for sustainability transformations, researchers need to be positioned as facilitators and co-creators rather than experts (Wengel et al., 2019) although not everyone agrees with that view and warn for scholars losing their independence (Duineveld & Dix, 2022).

Collaboration should not just be between tourism stakeholders and the industry but also with other research disciplines to address the complexity of sustainability and climate change issues (Becken, 2019). There is also a growing recognition around inter- and trans-disciplinary research focusing on solving the urgent sustainability and climate change issues and bringing transformation. An example is a mixed-reality game developed by a multidisciplinary group of researchers at the University of Lisbon on the role digital narratives can play in the co-creation of transformative tourism experiences for sustainability and climate change (Paiva et al., 2023). Transdisciplinarity is a basic assumption in codesign methods which aims to explore and manage the complexity of sustainability transformations in creative ways (Scuttari et al., 2021).

Co-design methods were found to be a prominent discussion theme and an effective way to collaborate and act for climate change because of their transformative power through interactions (Liburd et al., 2022). Co-design methods enable a multiplicity of epistemologies and ontologies and the exploration of alternative worldviews and developmental paths, when inclusive in terms of participation, which is important for the complexity of global environmental challenges (Duedahl, 2021; Liburd et al., 2022). It is an array of methods rather than a fixed method aiming to stimulate creativity and disruption of business-as-usual models and bring change towards sustainability (Bertella et al., 2021, p. 3). Co-design methods, such as living labs, offer the sharing and caring space for social innovation and the repolitisation of climate change action (Lapointe et al., 2021). Scholars though need to consider aspects of diversity and inclusivity (Bertella, 2022) and how to cultivate an ethic of care not only for human societies but also for the planet and reconsider the relationship between the human and the non-human world (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020) as important for transformative research to bring change.

### **Personal interest**

The importance of a personal interest was also discussed in all the groups as an important parameter to bring in engagement, commitment, and change. As one participant expressed “Climate change is a topic that touches me personally, using ourselves to create positive change”. Being passionate about climate change issues within tourism and the sense of urgency to act was thought of as important to commit to and bring some change in the system, which is indicative of the transformative role of climate change research. Cotterell et al. (2019) advocated for the personal paths and experiences that scholars carry with them regarding their engagement in activist research. These experiences may relate from before joining academia, their socio-political context, as well as theoretical influences. Transformative research is essentially subjective, meaning that researchers are entangled with the research through not least self-reflectivity and communication about their own values and motivations (Fazey et al., 2018). Scholars are neither value-free producers of knowledge nor untouched by what they research (Pernecky, 2020). Personal values, visions and goals shape our worldviews and guide our choices and therefore explicitly acknowledging them through self-reflexive practice can be transformative (Bertella, 2022). Therefore, epistemologies and methods that invite for that reflexivity to become explicit are necessitated in transformative research. Such epistemologies disrupt the linear knowledge production system and the traditional roles between researchers and participants and ask for caring and academic activism and transdisciplinarity (Bertella, 2022).

### **Responsibility for the future**

Positive change was indeed an important aspect within the discussions. As participants discussed during the workshop, researchers have a responsibility for future generations to lift the greater picture of climate change and tourism, “Need to work with young generation, make a change for them”. We should see “tourism as a force of good” which “can make a difference and contribute to

sustainability in the wider society and [just] not tourism alone”. In other words, scholars should “Make tourism more of a useful sector where we can tackle big issues such as climate change”. Such understandings align with recent trends in tourism research around regenerative and hopeful tourism, and tourism as an agent of change for good in transformative approaches (Bellato et al., 2022). These frameworks offer fruitful directions for future research within climate change and tourism transformative approaches, inviting scholars to rethink and reimagine the production and consumption of tourism in a hopeful and positive way (Ateljevic & Sheldon, 2022). Hales et al. (2018, p. 15) argued for the need to reconsider the role not only of tourism but also of tourism research for public good and for tourism researchers “to reclaim the notion of public good”.

What is important here is also the role of the researchers not only in fostering action oriented, collaborative research and building bridges with practitioners, but also in communicating and transmitting the message and making tourism a force of positive change. During the workshop, participants discussed scholars’ identities and their role in society. “Are we influencers to lead the way” was a question posed, wondering how we can relate to a world dominated by influencers and social media in communicating the importance of our research and encourage people to move out of their comfort zones. A number of authors have discussed the responsibility of tourism scholars with regard to climate change. (Higham & Font, 2020) have discussed the “climate hypocrisy” and the need for scholars to show leadership in reducing their travel carbon footprint. While the conference was entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism researchers are in most cases contributing to the problem of climate change when they travel to and from conferences. This led to a discussion on how to engage and collaborate with the goal of knowledge production without being part of the problem; do we need to travel or do we need to transform ourselves. This led to another discussion on how, as tourism scholars, we can set an example within the academic community by using more sustainable types of transportation or partake in conferences without travelling.

### **Communication**

In that effort [responsibility for the future], the workshop participants discussed that it is important that all voices are heard and feel that they are heard. Tourism is a multidimensional field of practice and study and offers great opportunities to contribute to sustainability in the community and address the big issues of climate change. Communication of climate change aspects within tourism and the importance of research and action were considered as very important in that direction during both the workshops and the presentations. Indeed, exercising critique and communicating this with the society to lead the way ahead and to provide “enlightened leadership” is an important role for scholars regarding climate change (Becken, 2019, p. 420). For Thomas (2022), scholars should find novel ways to collaborate with tourism practitioners and policymakers and to communicate their research results to increase the impact of tourism research and bridge the gap between research and practice. Communication is believed to lie at the heart of activist research, where the researcher needs to communicate and adapt to different audiences (Molina-Azorín & Font, 2016). Dissemination of research should go beyond the traditional tourism journals and reach scholars from other disciplines, as well as non-academics. Subjective epistemologies and action research can disrupt the linear knowledge production process and disseminate results in various forms and at various stages rather than only at the end of the research in the form of academic papers and collaborative co-creation processes have a role to play there (Duxbury et al., 2021).

Communication should be with all groups, not scholars alone, and in both directions. Students were considered an important group. Sustainability and climate change should be included in any tourism program in the form of tourism-specific courses but also a mandatory, interfaculty course on sustainability. Very importantly, we need to act as role models for students and reflect on the impact of our own travel. Policymakers were another important group identified to communicate with. In fact, scholars must be the connector and build bridges between all these different groups.

Transdisciplinary research can play a key role in communicating knowledge. Thomas (2022) has been critical of tourism researchers focusing on the performativity of their research rather than trying to reach out to the wider public, industry, policymakers and advocates for the need for more engaged and meaningful scholarship to counteract the impact of their research to reach the community and the policy agendas. Buijtenlijk et al. (2018) are also critical of the research-policy gap and identify the communication gap as a major barrier to the integration of academic knowledge into sustainable tourism and climate change policymaking.

What also became evident during the presentations and group discussions was the polyglot which is apparent in the communication of climate change issues as different stakeholder groups tend to have their own language and focus on their own issues. Stakeholders (including policymakers, industry but also scholars) can have a dual language when communicating with different groups. This complexity in communication often blurs the message and hinders action towards climate change. Complexity is exacerbated by the need to communicate with various stakeholders who might hold very divergent interests and understandings of climate change, tourism, and sustainability. Farsari (2018) discussed the polyglot and tourism stakeholders' cognitive polyphasia in their effort to cope with the social complexity and communicate with the various sub-groups they identify themselves within.

## Conclusions

This research note builds on discussions from a special track at an academic conference on transformative research around climate change and tourism. We worked with a transformative, reflexive approach already in the call for abstracts (the call was around transformative research, while submitted abstracts should end with a reflective statement/position/question; alternative formats to traditional abstracts were encouraged); and during the conference where presentations were kept very short to encourage participants to reflect on what is essential to communicate and allow dedicated time for small group discussions. During these discussions, we encouraged participants to engage again in self-reflection around meaningful research for climate change and tourism. Specifically, reflexivity was invited as to our own understanding of meaningful research and engagement, other people's understanding of it (imagining the world through other people's eyes) and our role and responsibility on engaging with this meaningful research for ourselves and for others. Reflexivity is an important aspect in transformative research (Bertella, 2022; Crossley, 2019; Rawluk et al., 2020) and to be able to imagine the world through other people's eyes (Duedahl, 2021; Liburd et al., 2022); this has been the focus for the special track participants as well as the authors of this research note during the analysis and writing phase. In addition to research communication and networking, this special track aimed to stimulate meaningful research for climate change and tourism and invite a transformation in ourselves and our research. This research note is part of this transformation targeting a wider audience than just the conference participants.

Our analysis of the abstracts, presentations and group discussions as illustrated earlier also highlight the transformative nature of research around climate change and tourism. Transformation is sought in ourselves as tourism researchers (personal interest and the urgency to act but still passionate about travel – do we need to transform more ourselves?), in stakeholders (understanding the bigger picture, the sector, collaborating, facilitating communication) and in students (what is their attitudes and behaviours regarding travel and climate change). Transformative research for climate change and sustainability goes hand in hand with action research and academic activism to bridge the gap between our research and the practice, policymaking, and the teaching of tourism (Bertella, 2022). This involves reflecting on the role of tourism as a force for good and on the role of tourism scholars in acting as bridges between different groups, creating relevant research for policymakers and showing the bigger picture (Bellato et al., 2022). This, in turn, involves taking a leading role within academia and the community, as well as acting as

role models regarding our own travel and practice. These findings indicate a research direction with subjective epistemologies and activist research approaches, employing co-design collaborative methods and integrating the role of scholars in research, collaboration, and education rather than fragmenting them, as well as employing self-reflexive practice. Given that the research problems around tourism and climate change are complex, transdisciplinary research is needed to integrate knowledge across scientific disciplines and engage non-academic stakeholders throughout the research process and produce knowledge *with* the society instead *for* the society (Seidl et al., 2013). Transformative epistemologies for transdisciplinarity such as design thinking, backed with a critical studies lens can challenge the Eurocentric and modernist approaches and invite for the decolonization of research and the transformations that the complex and wicked problems of a globalized world need (Jamal et al., 2021; Pernecky, 2020). Giving authors the possibility of submitting publications in languages other than English, in addition to opening sessions at conferences in languages other than English could bring, in the future, non-Western perspectives on how to face and teach how to live in a world in a crisis climate. Uneven powers of mobility, creating privileged forms for the elite, are exacerbated by uneven climate risks and vulnerabilities, and thus tourism researchers in the Global North should be aware of this uneven role especially since scholars representing countries which are unevenly carrying the burden are underrepresented in the tourism scholar community (Sheller, 2021). Nevertheless, this is a limited research note, based on a few scholars' discussions in a tourism academic conference, largely comprising Europe-based researchers limiting the insights incorporated to those of a privileged part of the world. Therefore, it does not aim to offer a representative documentation of researchers' understandings of climate change and tourism research. Rather, it aims to contribute to the spread of transformative research for climate change and underline the role and responsibility of scholars.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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