

Synergies of future-oriented research, sustainable tourism and adaptive governance: a dialogue with Dr Stefan Hartman, Head of Department at the European Tourism Futures Institute

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ABSTRACT: This edited transcript documents a dialogue between Rodney Westerlaken, editor-in-chief of *Research in Hospitality Management*, and Dr. Stefan Hartman, Head of Department at the European Tourism Futures Institute (ETFI) at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences. The conversation explores multifaceted dimensions of the tourism and hospitality sectors, encompassing the changing landscape of destination management, the influence of future-oriented research and the urgent imperatives arising from contemporary global challenges, such as over-tourism and sustainable development. The dialogue offers valuable insights into the future trajectory of tourism and hospitality research, emphasising the pivotal role of adaptive governance, stakeholder collaboration and scenario planning in shaping sustainable tourism practices. Furthermore, it underscores the significance of balancing economic interests with societal and environmental concerns in the evolving tourism landscape. In this insightful conversation, Dr Hartman's extensive urban and regional planning background, coupled with his current role at the European Tourism Futures Institute, provides a unique perspective on the future of tourism, leisure and hospitality. Dr Hartman's work focuses on adaptive tourism areas and sustainable destination development, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay between policy, industry and community in shaping tourism destinations.

Rodney Westerlaken (RW): Could you delineate your professional trajectory and current role?

Stefan Hartman (SH): I am the Head of Department at the European Tourism Futures Institute, an NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences research unit. I have held this position for approximately seven years. Before this, I was employed at NHL Stenden as a researcher and lecturer. My earlier academic experience includes a position at the University of Groningen, where I taught while pursuing my doctoral studies.

RW: Could you elaborate on the central themes of your doctoral research?

SH: My doctoral research (Hartman, 2016) was situated within the field of urban and regional planning, offering a distinct perspective on tourism. The study focused on the evolution of destinations, examining the processes by which they are created, shaped and reshaped by various actors, including policymakers and their decisions. I was particularly intrigued by the temporal dynamics of place development and the roles played by diverse stakeholders. My research specifically investigated the role of urban and regional planning, typically a public sector domain, in both facilitating and potentially impeding tourism development from a public policy perspective.

RW: Following the dissemination of your research findings, did you observe any tangible changes or receive feedback from governmental entities?

SH: Indeed, there has been a noticeable increase in attention towards what I term the "visitor economy", a concept that encompasses the event sector, leisure, tourism and hospitality. This domain is increasingly recognised for its societal significance, particularly in the Netherlands, where it is often referred to as the *gastvrijheids-economy*.

We have witnessed a paradigm shift from a focus on visitor attraction — the traditional marketing approach — to a more comprehensive management and placemaking strategy (Hartman et al., 2020). This evolution reflects a broader appreciation not only of the economic aspects, but also of the societal benefits and the industry's contribution to overall well-being. So, in terms of policy, as a policy domain, it has matured considerably. There are now many more linkages to urban planning, such as culture, transportation and the circular economy.

RW: The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a significant disruptor. How has this impacted decision-making processes and policy formulation in the tourism sector?

SH: The pandemic has indeed had profound implications. Concurrent with the outbreak, we initiated a study on the future of tourism, leisure and hospitality, exploring various potential

scenarios, including "business-as-usual" and "business-as-unusual" projections (Postma et al., 2020; 2024).

A key lesson derived from this crisis is the recognition of the need for societal improvement. The pandemic has catalysed a movement towards regenerative tourism and a collective aspiration for positive change. It has underscored the urgency of addressing contemporary challenges and highlighted the crucial role of research in facilitating this transformation.

However, retrospectively, some of our initial hypotheses may have been overly optimistic. There has been a significant inclination to revert to pre-pandemic operational models, suggesting that while novel ideas were proposed, their implementation may require more time and consideration. We are essentially back in the same situation. We talk about over-tourism, the same as we did in 2018 (Peeters et al., 2018). We talk about sustainable tourism, the same as we did before the pandemic.

RW: The resurgence of over-tourism has been notable. From your perspective, how do you interpret this phenomenon?

SH: The issue of over-tourism is indeed complex, involving multiple stakeholders with shared responsibilities (Hartman, 2023). The tourism industry bears responsibility for its strategic decisions and investments, while governmental bodies are accountable for policy interventions and zoning regulations. Additionally, local communities have emerged as crucial stakeholders, capable of expressing their concerns through various channels, including electoral processes and public demonstrations.

Our research on destination stewardship suggests that all stakeholders should function as custodians of a destination, prioritising its long-term viability over short-term resource exploitation (Imbsen et al. 2021). This necessitates a shift in discourse from purely growth-oriented strategies to equity and sustainable tourism development considerations.

We must shift the discussion from growth to "more is better". But can we also incorporate equity, for instance, or equitable tourism into this discussion? How can we ensure that there are benefits, but that they do not only end up with a small and very select group of people and are also spread more evenly?

RW: How are these concepts integrated into your current research initiatives?

SH: These themes permeate much of our work at the European Tourism Futures Institute. Our research encompasses various scales, from global projects such as our study on the future of Antarctic tourism — where we explore desired, undesired and risk-based futures — to regional initiatives in Friesland.

At the regional level, we develop monitoring systems and dashboards to inform decision-makers about the current state of tourism development. These tools help identify imbalances and areas requiring intervention, facilitating a more adaptive and responsive approach to destination management.

For instance, in the province of Friesland, we've designed a visitor survey and a survey among inhabitants to monitor the attitudes towards tourism development over time. This allows us to track when we might be getting out of balance. Similarly, when interviewing visitors, we ask about their experiences and their quality. If we see that appreciation is declining, it provides

important feedback for decision-makers and stakeholders in the industry.

RW: What guidance would you offer potential contributors to your journal, particularly given our expanded focus on leisure and tourism?

SH: I would encourage researchers to transcend the traditional view of the industry as purely an economic domain. It is crucial to explore the industry's impacts and broader value proposition. We need more empirical evidence and case studies demonstrating how the industry contributes to previously underserved stakeholders, or how it can aid in preserving cultural heritage.

These interdisciplinary approaches can illuminate the industry's multifaceted benefits (Hartman, 2022). Such research is publishable and valuable for educating future industry professionals who can implement these concepts in practice. Whether it is a thesis, a research project, or a doctoral study, disseminating these insights is paramount, and that is where the journal plays a crucial role in knowledge dissemination.

Note

1. This conversation is also available as a podcast. See our *Research in Hospitality Management* channel on Spotify.

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