

The role of data in sustainable tourism

By  Enver Duminy

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With Artificial Intelligence becoming increasingly dominant, in business and leisure, we're entering into a future that mirrors more and more of what we see in sci-fi movies. Will we see a time coming when tourists will simply slip on a headset and travel without leaving their homes?

I don't believe we'll ever get to that point; immersive visitor experience is just too much of an attraction for travellers, but what we must do is plan ahead to ensure that as we market our destinations, we're doing so in preparation for actual human arrivals.



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Data-based sustainability planning

Big data has a variety of potential uses in tourism. Besides providing a clearer picture of source markets and visitor preferences, it can also be used to pick up on trends and shifts in how visitors are adapting and also what social and environmental impacts are taking place.

Trusting in data for planning is one of the hard-learned lessons from the drought.

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The data was there all along, and yet the response did not meet the urgency of the demand, resulting in a crisis that shook the region and, as a result, the tourism sector. It has taken a massive response from the private and public sector, along with all locals and visitors to ensure that we have managed the crisis. What could we have done better? Certainly, we could have put measures in place years ago that would have helped to limit the impact, as well as adopting a water-friendly lifestyle approach. This is a trend that continues to dominate Cape tourism, as well as one that's affecting other regions in South Africa and across the globe.

Our approach to sustainability hasn't been limited to water, though, we are determined to apply sustainability principles across all sustainable tourism pillars, including the environment, socially and economically.

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For example, we currently get stats from Airports Company South Africa about arrivals at Cape Town International Airport. Imagine if we could do the same within neighbourhoods. A place like Langa is on the cusp of becoming a tourism centre, with tourism businesses growing to maturation. What are the visitor numbers there? We aren't certain, but were we to monitor these, we could then also see the impact on the community – have lifestyles improved as a result of the economic boost? Are more people employed in the area in tourism and tourism-related businesses? What can we learn from targeted tourism growth to hotspots like this?



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In the case of some neighbourhoods, overtourism can become a challenge, so this can only be counteracted by monitoring the data: if we don't have figures to go on, how can we know when there are too many visitors, before it's too late?

It's easy to look back and say we wish that more records were available to showcase the paths that tourism growth took, and, with data analytics becoming central to the business environment, this is a reality that could shape our future.

Individual businesses are using data to monitor their impact on the environment, the next step is for an entire destination to do so. Reducing the number of motor vehicles needed in the city, for example, is one means that data can be used for the common good. Improved infrastructure including public transport can contribute to this, as well as pedestrianising more of our roads.

A data-based strategy for success

Any successful business has a record of their growth – the business owner will track sales, expenditure, profitability and more, including monitoring of campaigns. That's how you discover what works and what doesn't, and how you develop a strategy that can tap into opportunities. The bigger picture comprises of many smaller pictures.

Sustainability, like success, is not just an abstract concept – it can be tracked, and adjustments made along the way to ensure that it's ongoing. That's the key to developing a tourism environment that's built to last, one that will continue to delight future visitors, even if they are beaming down from spacecraft and exploring via jetpacks.

ABOUT ENVER DUMINY

Enver Duminy is the CEO at Cape Town Tourism

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