

Bridging the Behaviour Gap: The Role of Metacognition in Sustainable Tourism

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Many of us may not be familiar with the term Metacognition. It is related to our cognitive capability with an additional layer. In simple words metacognition is thinking about our own thoughts. We watch and analyse our own thoughts as a third person through metacognition. It is actually an art of stepping outside of your own mind to observe your thoughts as a third person. That helps decision making in an unbiased manner. The concept of sustainable tourism is perhaps more known to most. It is primarily conserving the physical environment and the cultural endowments in any tourist destination. It is respecting local people and their heritage, boost local economy of the destination

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and making sure that negative foot print is left at the destination. However, in general the tourist behaviours do not conform to these objectives. That is the reason we find massive crowds, increased pollution, innumerable hotels, littering of wastes, clearing of forests, exploitation of local people in low paying jobs and several others in most of the destinations. The habitats of the local people are destroyed in many ways by the massive tourist influx.

It is not that we do not know or observe these negative impacts. However, as most of the tourists are comfort seeking, tourism businesses are also keen to provide it to make profit. Even the policies, apparently promoting sustainability, are not at all conducive for sustainable tourism in practice. As a result of this combination of factors, most of the destinations has turned into complete commercial places. And, this is happening in a tremendous pace. However, no one suffers except the local population (who are not in tourism business) and local environment, including both flora and fauna. It is also important to understand that only policing through creating policies cannot alter this situation. It is the awareness of the tourists that can deter behaviours which are against sustainable tourism. Metacognition can help tourists to reflect on their activities and change individual's behaviour towards pro-sustainable one.

This blog highlights a key question that can we change our tourism behaviour with the help of metacognition? I have tried to explore this possibility in this blog. Sustainable tourism development requires proactive actions and thoughts on part of the stakeholders including tourists, destination managers, hotel/homestay owners, tourism operators etc. as well as policy makers. However, since policies and policy makers are beyond access/control of the common people, this blog discusses how awareness among tourism stakeholders including tourists, tour operators and the similar ones may orient current tourism behaviour towards a sustainable one. We see dialogues across the world on sustainable tourism. But in reality, except in some countries, these dialogues remain on paper without being translated into meaningful actions on part of stakeholders.

This negligence regarding promotion of sustainable tourism in real sense can be observed on part of every stakeholder including policy makers, tour operators, destination managers and tourists themselves. When other stakeholders represent the supply side of core tourism activities, tourists represent the demand side. In other words, all other stakeholders, including government, are providers of tourism services. Tourists are the sole consumers of tourism activities in a destination. Therefore, tourists are accountable for responsible consumption of tourism products and services. How to decipher the reasons behind the non-responsible behaviour of the tourists and what can be done to translate these behaviours conforming the sustainable one. This blog post explored a brief narrative on hardcore research findings on sustainable tourism behaviour. Finally, a few strategies that might be suitable to alter tourists' behaviours using metacognition is also presented.

The Oslo Symposium on sustainability in 1994 proposed a working definition of sustainable consumption. It is defined as “*the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations*”. (<https://enb.iisd.org/consume/oslo004.html>). This definition is applicable to every product or service in any economy, including tourism. In last couple of decades, most of the destinations experienced rampant unplanned tourism activities much beyond their carrying capacities. This has led to multiple challenges including immense pressure on infrastructure, unconstrained expansion of hotels/homestays, substantial increase in prices of land and other products, completely jeopardized quality of life of the locals except those involved in tourism activities and the similar ones. Even in several places the young people of the local communities stopped cultivating their lands completely to get involved in tourism business. This list is perhaps uncountable. In Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and other hill states in India regular landslides in rainy season is a common phenomenon now. Building infrastructure, partially for local development and partially to accommodate tourism activities, also contribute to numerous problems for the locals as well as for sustainable tourism development.

Sustainable tourism development depends to a large extent on tourists’ behaviour since they are the sole consumer of the tourism services in every way. Since tourism behaviour depends on awareness and intentions of the tourists, this itself can be an impactful instrument towards the goal of promoting sustainable tourism. Tourist behaviour is driven by thought process of the tourists that entails sensitivity towards restoring the environmental and cultural resources of the destinations. It emancipates from an outlook of experiencing local tourism endowments without leaving adverse footprints at the destination. Here comes the role of metacognition. Metacognition is defined as the higher order thinking that involves active control over the one’s cognitive processes engaged in decision making. This is an enabler of decision making process through monitoring, evaluating, and regulating one’s own cognitive processes. As a result, it leads to a more rational, less biased and better-planned choices.

However, it is much easier saying than done. Majority of the tourists’ behaviour in India is far from being aligned with sustainable one. This is true for tourists irrespective of their educational, professional as well as income profile. This blog post is primarily an attempt to understand whether cognitive awareness and acting accordingly may modify tourists’ behaviour to a more sustainable one. Large number of studies are available that explored tourism behaviour in multiple contexts. Majority of these studies attempt to elucidate tourism behavioral issues with the theories linked to neuroscience and other psychological domains of knowledge. Rational factors are commonly viewed as primary determinants of behavioural issues in most of the studies. Tourists’ sustainable behaviour practices are explained using *theory of planned behaviour*. It suggests that an individual’s intention to perform a specific

behaviour is generally shaped by three key rational factors, viz., attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. These rational factors represent individual's evaluation of sustainable behaviour; perceived social pressure to emulate such behaviour; and individual's perception of their own ability to carry out such behaviour. In the process, an individual evaluates the advantages, disadvantages, existing norms and own ability before making tourism decisions. The most critical fact is that all of these factors often align with tourist's self-interests. It is argued by several scholars that this is an oversimplified process to explain complex behaviours by tourists. Many a times the decisions are observed to be impulsive and also lacking fully reasoned thoughts. Also, decisions are greatly influenced by cultural and societal factors along with many other non-cognitive influences.

Some of the studies proposed the *theory of reasoned goal pursuit*, which is an extension of the previous one, to overcome this challenge of over simplification. This theory views tourism behaviour as a goal-driven one and considers it entirely as intention-based. Tourists' behavioural intentions are not formed in isolation. They reflect the present active objectives of the tourists. These objectives may change significantly over time and also depend on contexts. Conflicting goals, such as comfort, relaxation, or social approval may prevail over pro-sustainable thoughts of the tourists. For instance, a tourist who in general prefers a sustainable travel mode, may still select a carbon-intensive transport mode when time saving is the key objective. This theory takes into account such contradictions by diagnosing behaviours and the goal. This can help in developing tools to fortify sustainable actions into decision making. It requires prioritising sustainability-related goals as more cognitive thoughts making it a dominant motivation.

Another study identified that behavioural biases on part of the tourists occur at three stages of tourism - pre-travel decision making, on-site decision making, and post-trip reflections on experience. Emotions and existing biases often prevent tourists from making rational sustainability-oriented decisions. Evidences from various researches suggest that tourists also act inconsistently with their declared positive attitudes towards sustainable tourism. Examples of such inconsistencies are failing to purchase local products, not using environmentally friendly transport, or behaving irresponsibly with local communities etc.

Overall, it is observed that though attitudes can influence intentions, but not always capable in translating it into matching behaviours in practice. Sustainability is associated with changing attitudes and external factors on regular basis. Therefore, the ways to explain tourists' behaviour and predict possibilities of long-term sustainable behaviour must be dynamic and flexible. The complexities involved in specific holiday choice and consequent environmental and social impacts need to be captured with clarity. A dynamic perspective is required to explain why positive attitudes towards sustainability often fail to convert into meaningful behavioural change. Studies observed that unconscious thoughts often outperform conscious judgements in

complex decisions. This is due to the fact that several brain functions operate automatically and bypass consciousness to prevent cognitive overload during day-to-day tasks. Overlooking these influences makes understanding of tourism behaviour in real world inadequate. If the process of reflection on cognitive capacity on human decision-making is not inbuilt, it may not explain tourism behaviour eloquently.

Metacognition is defined as the second-order cognition to reflect on thinking about the primary thoughts. Metacognition is a key mechanism which helps individuals to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their thoughts and emotions. This can regulate behaviours in response to social and environmental triggers. Despite its significant relevance, application of metacognition remains less explored in context of tourism studies, especially from sustainability point of view. Understanding the role of metacognition on decision-making can facilitate more effective interventions and strategies at a larger scale. It may help in promoting sustainable choices addressing potential cognitive barriers. Metacognition has been employed in marketing research to influence pro-sustainability behaviours. For instance, it has been used to examine how social media influencers shape consumer behaviour towards more sustainable consumption.

Metacognition can also help self-validation of self-perception to influence sustainable tourism behaviours. Tourists who self-identify themselves as environmentally conscious may make decisions to select eco-friendly accommodations or engaging in conservation activities, compared to those who do not identify themselves in similar way. It can help in filtering information relevant to sustainable tourism decisions from loads of misleading and irrelevant marketing information. When metacognitive capabilities are better equipped, sustainable choices may be selected despite short-term inconveniences or costs. Social group affiliations including joining sustainable tourism communities also help in metacognition. This influences individual decision-making to reinforce sustainable behaviour through shared values and collective identity. Tourists can be engaged in reflective practices to understand how their actions may impact the values and customs of the host community in a destination.

Finally, when evidences demonstrate that metacognition can help sustainable tourism behaviour, the question is how to translate this into real world practice. A few steps may help to achieve this, at least for a significant proportion of tourists. A few of the actions on part of multiple stakeholders including tourists are mentioned below:

1. Social media being one of key influencing platform in today's world, tour operators/managers should educate tourists on sustainable choices. This should be done on regular basis so that social media users are aware of ill effects of unsustainable tourism behaviours.

2. Apps can be shared with individuals personally or on social media so that one can self-evaluate tourism behaviour. This helps a person realise whether sustainable tourism behaviour is his/her choice and how to respond in a situation when conflicting goals emerge. It makes a person more conscious about own decision making towards sustainability. It also helps in validating sustainable choices and encourage better self-regulation towards sustainability goals.
3. Hotel/homestay owners, branded or unbranded, can showcase their sustainable practices including how to sustainably save non-renewable resources (water, electricity etc.), responsible practice towards waste management and the similar ones. This should also include how they help host community through promoting local products as part of responsible consumption behaviour. It may impact metacognition of the tourists planning to travel.
4. Tourism authorities or destination managers can display how tourists can conform with sustainable tourism behaviours without leaving negative footprints, environmental and cultural. Imposition of strict penalties on violators may also help. Videos should be posted that helps people to think about negative implications of their actions on the host community and the destination.
5. Access to this information in form of social marketing through various platforms prior to travel, can make people well aware about sustainable and responsible tourism behaviour. As a result, tourists are encouraged to follow a metacognitive process at the time of decision making. This may avoid inconsistent behaviours and promote self-regulation to restrict themselves within sustainable choices.
6. Above all, government and policy makers can play a great role through digital campaigns on sustainable tourism related awareness generation program.

Suggested Readings:

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