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## STORIES OF SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM

### Abstract

Stories have become a common element in many tourism promotional campaigns reflecting a “story turn” in tourism practice and in marketing more generally. This story turn is not new to the broader social science disciplines of anthropology, sociology and psychology and there is a growing body of evidence that stories can be powerful forms of persuasion. This chapter argues that while stories have always been central to tourist experiences and are increasingly important in tourism promotion, their potential use in other aspects of tourism has yet to be fully explored. Within this context stories could be used in a variety of ways to improve the sustainability of tourism. After briefly reviewing the story turn, this chapter outlines an overall model that identifies places where stories might be used to enhance the sustainability of tourism within destinations. The chapter then focuses on the use of stories in tourist experiences to encourage them to engage in more sustainable action both during and beyond the tourist setting. Using the relevant literature to identify the features of effective stories for sustainability, the chapter describes a set of principles for the design and use of stories for sustainability in tourism.

**Keywords:** Story turn, tourism futures, tourism sustainability, persuasive stories, sustainability stories.

### INTRODUCTION

Gottschall's (2012) identification of stories as fundamental for human existence is based on extensive evidence gathered from psychology, anthropology and sociology reflecting a strong story turn in each of these social science disciplines. Psychology was the earliest discipline to recognize the importance of stories in human cognition, especially memory, comprehension and learning (Schank & Berman, 2002) and individual identity (McAdams, 2018). Anthropology also has a long-standing interest in stories as way of creating and transmitting culture and maintaining social bonds (McGranahan, 2015). In sociology, the story turn reflects aspects of postmodern societies where social identities and changes in power structures have enhanced the importance of telling the stories of individuals and previous marginalized groups (Polletta et al., 2011). This story turn acknowledges stories as valuable topics for research attention as they are common in everyday practice. Not surprisingly, stories have become an important educational and persuasive strategy in applied areas such as education and marketing (Brakke & Houska, 2015; Spiller, 2018) and in communicating about, and encouraging sustainability action (Leinaweaver, 2015; Robertson, 2019). This chapter is situated within the story turn and argues that stories are both central to much contemporary tourism practice (Moscardo, 2020a) and valuable tools for improving the conduct of tourism especially in the area of sustainability.

Before exploring links between stories and sustainability in tourism it is important to clarify definitions of key terms, especially as many tourism researchers often use the terms stories and narratives interchangeably, and as there are two different ways the term narrative is used. In its common usage in psychology, sociology and anthropology, a narrative is a broad term for “the representation of an event or a series of events” (Abbott, 2021, p. 12). Stories then are a specific type of narrative (Abbott, 2021). Moscardo (2020b, p. 3) defines stories as narratives that “must provoke emotional responses, and have a clear beginning, setting and ending, a primary goal of

entertainment and a sequence of causally related events which includes a challenge or unexpected incident, the reaction of characters to that challenge or incident, the consequences of those reactions and some sort of resolution". Narratives in literary analysis are seen quite differently and are usually described as themes or core messages within stories that bind together multiple stories (Moscardo, 2017a). In this sense they are like the master or meta-narratives of psychology and sociology (cf., Causadias et al., 2018).

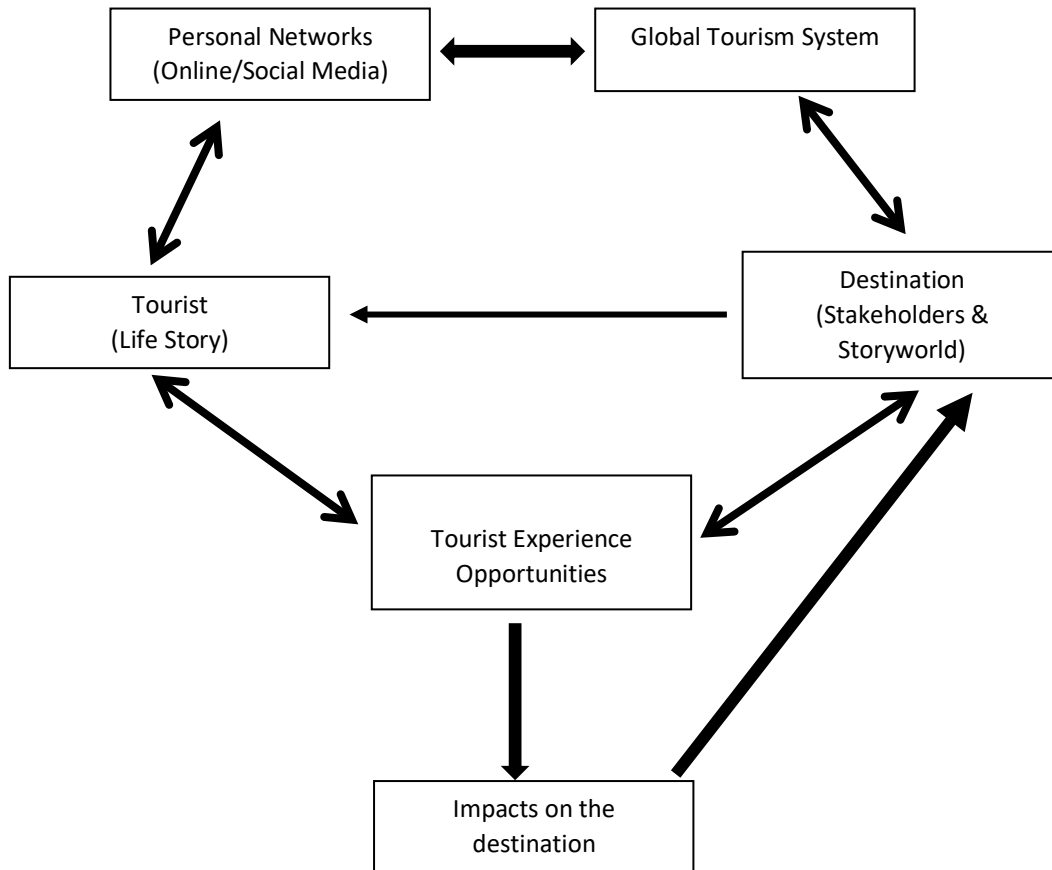
While there has been a considerable increase in narrative analysis in tourism research, the specific analysis and use of stories in research in tourism has been limited (McCabe & Foster, 2006; Moscardo, 2020b). One exception is the use of stories in futures analysis where they are referred to as futures scenarios (Burnam-Fink, 2015). The creation of future scenarios requires several analytical steps including understanding or mapping the present situation, analysis of the factors and processes that underpin key aspects of this situation and, either exploring possible sources of change and disruption to this present state, or identifying pathways to desirable futures (Inayatullah, 2008; Jones et al., 2011). See Hughes and Moscardo (2019) and Moscardo (2021) for examples of this methodology applied to tourism. The present chapter assumes that improving the sustainability of tourism is a desirable future for tourism planners and managers and thus uses this futures methodology to analyze and identify guidelines for using stories to encourage greater sustainability in, and through, tourism. More specifically it:

- maps out the present situation describing a stories model of tourism which sets out the various roles that stories have within the tourism destination system;
- examines in more detail the use of stories in tourist experience opportunities to encourage sustainability at and beyond the destination;
- identifies the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of stories as persuasive tools and positive experiences based on a review of the relevant literature; and
- identifies pathways to improving the relationships between tourism and sustainability by describing a set of principles for the design and use of stories for sustainability in tourist experiences.

## **A STORIES MODEL OF TOURISM DESTINATIONS**

Figure 1 presents a simplified stories model of tourism at the destination level. Within this model there are six main elements and eight interconnections of importance to the present discussion. The thickness of the connecting arrows indicates the strength or importance of the connection. At the center of the model are the tourist experience opportunities (TEOs) that are available to destination visitors and these include the tours, attractions and activities that are offered to tourists. These are developed and managed by tourism businesses, destination marketing/management organizations (DMOs), government agencies and residents, who are all stakeholders in the destination element in the model. It is these TEOs and the infrastructure and processes that support them that are the main source of impacts, both positive and negative, determining the sustainability of tourism at the destination level. The TEOs are presented in promotional material targeted both directly at tourists and indirectly through the large global tourism system. Put simply DMOs, tourism planners and developers and tourism businesses select which TEOs to offer based on destination resources and perceptions of market demand. These TEOs are promoted widely to potential tourists and then directly to actual tourists on arrival. Tourist choices have always been influenced by advice and recommendations from their personal networks as well as by destination promotion, but in recent years these personal networks are typically connected online through social media making them more pervasive and able to have a more immediate impact on tourists' choices (Narangajavana et

al., 2017). What and how tourists engage in TEOs then generates the impacts that are critical to tourism and sustainability at that destination.



**Figure 1: A Stories Model of Tourism Destinations**

### Stories and Tourist Experiences

Stories exist in multiple places within this model. The two most important places for stories are the tourist and the destination. It was noted in the introduction that personal and social identity is built around stories. For tourists each trip offers an opportunity to write a new chapter in the life story that supports their identity (Moscardo, 2017a). Destinations offer tourists a storyworld, or a set of stories linked by a common theme, time, character or location (Moloney, 2020; Moscardo, 2018). Increasingly destinations select options from their storyworld to tell potential tourists through traditional promotional campaigns but also through the user generated online and social media content incorporated into their marketing. The destination storyworld includes the personal stories of destination residents, historic and cultural stories of the place and its social groups, the stories of the tourism businesses, activities and attractions on offer, stories of previous tourists and links to fictional stories such as novels, movies and television shows. In addition, it includes the story of tourism in the destination, how and why it was developed and how it impacts on the destination.

## **Stories and Sustainability**

Stories can be linked to destination sustainability in multiple ways. The type of story developers and planners tell about tourism can influence the extent to which destination residents are able to leverage tourism as a resource to enhance their well-being (see Moscardo, in press, for more detail). The selection of which stories to tell in promotional activities influences the type of tourist attracted, the level of engagement with the destination community, tourist expectations in terms of consumption and action, and power relations between groups within the destination community. For example, promoting an island destination in a protected marine area with stories of full moon dance parties and celebrities enjoying sumptuous luxury encourages a style of tourism that both excludes residents but also encourages less sustainable tourist behaviours. Similarly telling stories of the colonial history of the island may attract different tourists but excludes already marginalized Indigenous groups. Of particular interest to the present chapter are the stories that are told about the destination during and after tourist experiences that are specifically aimed at persuading tourists to be more sustainable both at and beyond the destination, and the personal stories that tourists' create from their destination experiences that can be shared to encourage more sustainable action beyond tourism.

## **Stories in Interpretation and Visitor Management**

Interpretation is a term that refers to the presentation of information about a destination through activities such as guided tours, on signs on walking trails and in exhibitions and displays. Interpretation plays two important roles in tourism – it is a core element of many TEOs contributing to visitor satisfaction and, building on these positive experiences, informs and encourages minimal impact or sustainable action onsite (Moscardo, 2017b). Stories have long been recognized as a core element of interpretation both because of their effectiveness in education and persuasion and because of their entertainment value (Staiff, 2014). An example of this use of stories can be found in an exhibition about tree kangaroos at the Malanda Falls Visitor Interpretive Centre in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area in Northern Australia. This display includes panels telling the story of Kimberley an orphaned baby tree kangaroo who was taken in by a local wildlife carer and who became the model for a virtual reality (VR) experience of life in the rainforest told from the perspective of Kimberley. The VR story includes incidents with some of the human dangers that tree kangaroos face, reinforcing the list of actions that visitors can take to support tree kangaroo conservation. This story both provides an experience with tree kangaroos and encourages sustainable behavior while in the destination. Sustainability stories can also be told during tourist experiences to encourage sustainable behavior beyond the destination. The New Belgium Brewery offers a very popular tour for visitors in Fort Collins, Colorado, USA. As tourists move through the brewery on the tour there are several places where they must wait for short periods and in these spaces are a series of exhibits that tell the story of the founders of the brewery and especially their personal focus on making boutique beer in a more environmentally responsible way. This story demonstrates that people can make small sustainable changes in their everyday lives and encourages people to both make these small changes and also to make more sustainable choices when it comes to their beverages.

Another option in telling sustainability stories directly to tourists involves telling sustainability success stories after their experiences. These stories explain the sustainability actions the relevant tourism enterprise has taken and how the tourist's actions have contributed to improvements in sustainability. This is an increasingly common strategy for retail brands. The social enterprise Who

Gives a Crap, for example, shares sustainability success stories with its customers through social media providing stories about how their purchases of toilet paper and paper towels contributes to improving the lives and environments of the people in the stories. Feedback on performance has been consistently shown to be a powerful tool for encouraging desirable action in many areas of psychology (Hermsen et al., 2016; Karlin et al., 2015). Such post experience success stories have also been suggested to encourage tourists suffering from eco-pessimism, eco-fatalism and eco-anxiety to begin to develop more positive approaches to sustainable tourism options (Moscardo & Pearce, 2019).

### **Co-creating Stories**

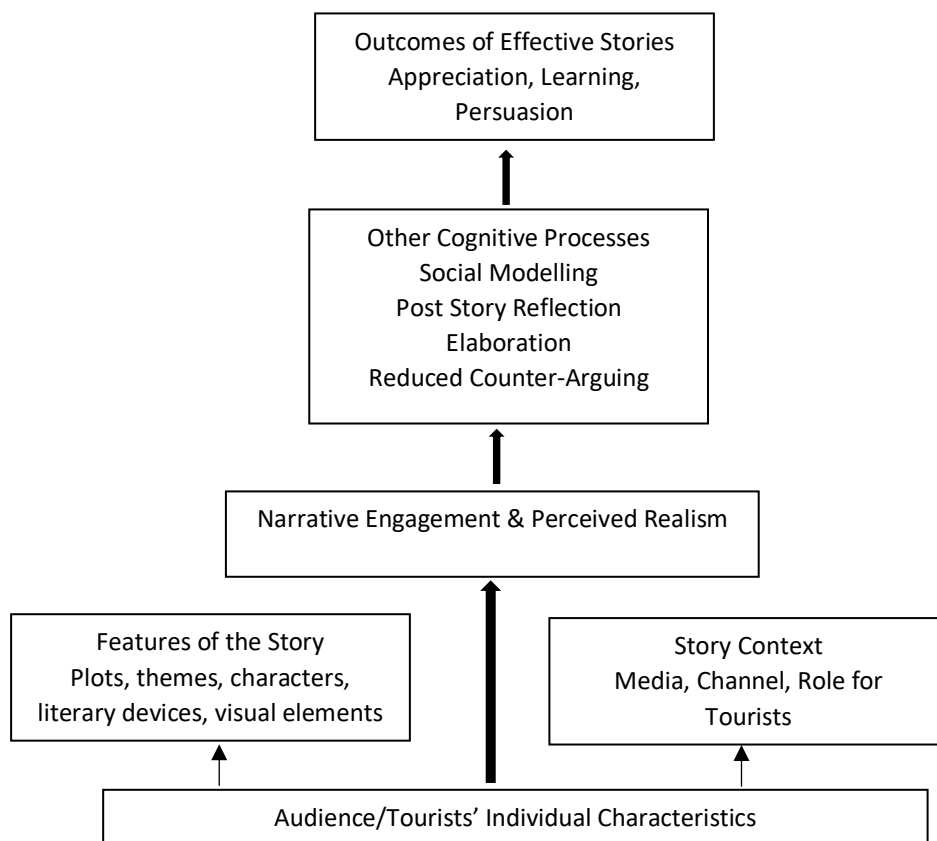
The final option to consider are experiences that allow tourists to create or co-create their own stories. Experiences in this category exist on a continuum from those that are highly structured and organized by the activity or attraction managers with tourists making it their own story by playing preset roles through to those that are supported by the activity or attraction managers but the tourists are the writers, directors and actors guiding the story completely. An example of a highly structured story-based experience opportunity can be found at Green Island in Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and World Heritage Area. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, rapidly increasing numbers of package tourists from mainland China began arriving on Green Island to experience the Great Barrier Reef. The large numbers of visitors combined with their low levels of experience in swimming and snorkeling in this type of environment contributed to a number of environmental management issues and to less positive experiences for the tourists. One suggested management strategy was to create a story-based walk around the island that could offer those with limited skills and interest in water-based activities a way to fill in their time and learn more about the heritage of the island. It was also hoped that it would decrease pressure on the beach access areas and move larger numbers of visitors to the already hardened walking trail decreasing damage to vegetation in other places. The walk was supported by a series of QR codes on the interpretive signs that linked the tourists to Chinese podcasts providing clues to in a nature-based treasure hunt challenge story. HasleInteractive is an example of a mobile urban drama in which a story is used to encourage participants to engage in a series of activities that takes them through a natural environment seeking clues to help solve a science fiction mystery. The visitors are seeking answers to assist two scientists to understand why large parts of nature are dying. While the basic story premise is provided and the activity is guided by the mobile technology, individuals have choices and options for personalizing the experience and creating their own story (Hansen et al., 2012). While examples directly linked to sustainability of the final more visitor-based story creation are difficult to find, presenting various tours and activities as personal journeys of challenge is not uncommon in tourism (cf., Mathisen, 2013; Nelson, 2015; Pera, 2017). The stories model suggests that another way to encourage more sustainable tourist actions is to develop opportunities for tourists to engage in their own personal sustainability, rather than physical or emotional, challenge or adventure story.

The examples provided thus far are about development of co-created story-based experiences directly focused on sustainability content. It could also be argued that story-based co-created experiences can also support tourism sustainability through links to staycations and slow tourism. Concerns over the sustainability of global tourism focus on the importance of persuading tourists to travel less including holidaying in their home region in what are called staycations, and travelling slower in terms of staying longer in a single destination and using alternative slower forms of transport (Hall, 2011; de Bloom et al., 2017). While the COVID 19 pandemic has made staycations the only form of travel currently available to many tourists it has raised the challenge of finding ways

to make local TEOs seem attractive to local residents. Story-based co-creation TEOs offer a way to address this issue with personalized adventures and stories that reveal the exotic beneath the mundane in local areas. As travel restrictions ease there is anecdotal evidence that tourists may seek slow tourism options to limit their exposure to large numbers of other travelers. Story-based cocreation TEOs also offer potential to support slow tourism giving people the chance to create personal stories that can extend over multiple time periods and activities within a single location.

## FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE STORIES

Major reviews reporting the effectiveness of stories in persuasive communication exist in many areas including pro-environmental education (Rhodes et al., 2016), desirable health action (Shen et al., 2015), and prosocial behaviour programs (Steinemann et al., 2013). A review of two substantial research areas in psychology, the effectiveness of persuasive communication and enjoyment and learning from popular media and entertainment, provides both a conceptual model to explain the main processes that link stories to effective persuasion and a set of consistent results identifying the factors that influence this effectiveness. Figure 2 sets out a simplified version of this conceptual model developed from the work of Busselle and Bilandzic (2008), Carpenter and Green (2012), and Green and Dill (2013).



**Figure 2: Simplified Model of Stories and Persuasion**

At the centre of this model are the concepts of narrative engagement and perceived realism. Narrative engagement is a broad term that summarizes key ways in which stories encourage cognitive elaboration and includes comprehensibility, character connection and narrative transportation (Johnson & Sangalang, 2017). Stories are a basic cognitive structure making them generally more easily comprehended than other information structures which allows attention to focus on the content and messages in the story (Green & Dill, 2013). All stories have characters and story audience can connect to these characters in two ways – identification and parasocial interaction. Identification involves wanting to be like the character; in the words of Cohen (2011, p. 248) “imagining being someone else and imagining behaving like someone else”. Parasocial interaction refers to seeing the character as likeable and a friend (Carpenter & Green, 2012). Perceived realism is where the audience perceives that the plot and the actions of the characters are plausible and consistent within the story (Nera et al., 2018). Perceived realism is about consistency and plausibility and not about whether or not the story is fact, fiction or fantasy with no evidence to suggest that factual stories are more effective than fiction. If a story is easily comprehensible and can generate narrative engagement and perceived realism in its audience then it is more likely to encourage:

- a reduction in counter arguing where people actively seek to evaluate claims made by others (Nabi & Meyer-Guse, 2013);
- an increase in elaboration deeper processing of the issues covered in the story (Nabi & Green, 2015); and
- more post story reflection where the individual remembers the story and shares it with others (Popova, 2015).

When these are combined with clear messages and the social modeling or demonstration of desired action by characters in the story then stories are likely to have positive outcomes including appreciation, learning and persuasion (Nabi & Meyer-Guse, 2013). The process is influenced by three main sets of variables, features of the story, individual characteristics of the audience and features of the context. Of particular interest to the present discussion are the features of the story and how these encourage perceived realism and narrative engagement. This discussion does not include research that demonstrates the importance of features related to all forms of communication, not just stories, such as checking on the readability of written text, avoiding technical jargon, and using short sentences and active voice. In terms of story context, we can distinguish between stories that are told to tourists where the tourists are primarily audience members and stories that are co-created with tourists through action and engagement. Tourists can be told stories through written media, such as on interpretive signs and in brochures and guides or they can listen to stories for live story tellers or through audiovisual media. The available research suggests that listening to a story is more effective than reading a story (Matlin, 2013), possibly because reading takes up more cognitive processing resources and takes longer and because storytellers can introduce emotion through their voices and gestures (Gallo, 2016). In co-created experience-based stories tourists have more active roles making choices and engaging in action. Greater engagement and direct experience are associated with more effective persuasive power (Moscardo, 2017c). Emerging research from the realm of trans-media storytelling where stories play out across a range of different media with elements of games typically accessed through mobile online and digital platforms suggest that this use of technology in story-based action is also an effective tool for learning and persuasion (Blumberg et al., 2013). While the choice of context for storytelling has to fit into the nature of the destination, what the destination community is comfortable with, the resources available and the nature of the story, it is clear that story co-creation and active engagement in a story is a more desirable option than simply telling tourists a story. Finally there are features of the actual story and



Table 1 summarizes the major conclusions from research examining the features that contribute to effective experience and persuasion outcomes.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Effective Stories**

Literary devices such as analogies, metaphors and repetition are effective at gaining and holding audience attention but the use of too many literary devices can make stories more difficult to comprehend and distract attention from the content and messages
Presenting the story in its chronological order (although some storytellers play with timelines to introduce suspense, this is not a universal literary device and again can make comprehension more difficult)
Providing multisensory detail in descriptions Describing and encouraging emotions
Ensuring that the introduction to the story includes details and information required to understand later incidents and responses, which means identifying necessary knowledge that a storyteller might mistakenly assume the audience has
Starting the story with a surprise, mystery, question or challenge Presenting clear and explicit causal links between events and consequences and signaling critical information
Having a critical central event where a character must make a decision or meet a challenge using what they have learnt earlier in the story
Creating and describing relatable and authentic characters that audience members can connect to
Using established plots such as the hero's journey Using universal themes such as survival, love, family and sacrifice, rebirth or discovery of self, overcoming challenges and defeating evil and achieving justice attracts
Telling a story of success

(Selected sources: Gabay, 2015; Gallo, 2016; Graesser et al., 1997; Nabi & Green, 2015; Popova, 2015; Reed, 2013; Richards, 2012).

## **PRINCIPLES FOR THE DESIGN AND USE OF STORIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURIST EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES**

This summary of a review of research into stories in psychology and related areas identifies features and processes that enhance stories as a persuasive communication tool especially about sustainability. Combining these with consideration of the ways in which stories might be used to enhance tourism sustainability at the destination level generates a set of principles for improving the planning and management of tourism. Table 2 lists these principles.

**Table 2: Principles for Sustainability Stories in Tourist Experiences**

The experience must be based around a complete story not just a description of an incident or event, it must have characters, a challenge, incident or problem that these characters have to face, their reactions, the consequences of these reactions and some sort of resolution with a clear, lesson, moral, theme or take home message.

The story should be created around a universal theme (survival, love, family and sacrifice, rebirth or discovery of self, overcoming challenges and defeating evil and achieving justice) and be a success story.

A co-created story or a story told to tourists that provides them with opportunities to have direct engagement in activities linked to the story are preferable to storytelling where the tourists play a passive role.

The story should have clearly established authentic characters that tourists can connect to and, where possible, tourists should be encouraged to imagine themselves as a character in the story. Where possible local residents could be used to play characters in the story.

The story should begin with a surprise and establish important core knowledge before leading up to a major incident, decision, event or challenge that must be resolved using knowledge learnt in the earlier parts of the story.

The story should be told or created in chronological order and include very clear and explicit causal links.

The story should use multiple senses and highlight emotions whenever possible.

## **NOTES OF CAUTION**

Three areas of caution need to be recognized when considering the use of stories to encourage greater sustainability in tourism – the sustainability of the stories and story-based activities; the need for more tourism specific research and the need to understand and recognize the deliberative routine action distinction in encouraging tourist to engage in sustainable actions. Although the previous sections have outlined the different ways in which stories can be used effectively to encourage greater sustainability both in and beyond tourism, it is important to remember that every tourism management strategy, process and/or decision can also be examined in terms of its own sustainability. Moscardo (2017a) mentions three challenges for the sustainability of storytelling in the design of tourist experiences. The first is determining whose stories are told, whose are not told and who has the authority to choose, present and alter stories. These decisions both reflect and influence the nature of power relationships within destination communities and raise ethical issues especially for often marginalized indigenous groups for whom stories may be a special element of their cultures (cf., Belfiore, 2018). The second challenge is to critically assess and manage the environmental and social impacts of the actual activities linked to storytelling and story creating tourist experiences. Moscardo's (2017) third challenge was to manage the impacts of tourists copying stories circulated through social media. In 2018 Moscardo expanded this latter point to include managing the negative or undesirable stories tourists tell about destinations through social media. This last challenge raises several issues that are not easy to resolve. More specifically, judgements about whose stories are desirable are based on values and power and so are likely to always have some element of conflict. It is also likely that very effective story-based TEOs will be popular and this may create problems with attracting too many visitors, a common dilemma in tourism. Finally, managing stories distributed on social media requires engagement with the wider social media audience and not just the tourists and management strategies for this context have yet to be fully determined and evaluated.

The principles developed in this chapter are based on considerable evidence from thousands of studies published in psychology and persuasive communication conducted in a wide range of settings including education and training, health, pro-social action, pro-environmental action, politics, business, retail consumption, and media and entertainment consumption. In addition, they are supported by well-established theories that have been tested over extended periods of time. They are not however based on research into stories on the tourism context because there is little such research available. It may be that tourist experiences are too fleeting and singular to generate the same effects or that context variables are stronger in tourism settings than in other more familiar locations. While the limited tourism research available, does however, support the conclusions and principles outlined in this chapter (Buchmann et al, 2010; Kim 2012; Kim & Youn, 2017; Macionis & Sparks, 2009; Moscardo, 2017c; Ryu et al., 2019), more research is needed.

The final note of caution to be considered lies in the need to be careful when discussing how to encourage tourist to engage in sustainable actions to recognise the difference between habitual repetitive behaviours such as hanging up towels and switching off lights, and deliberative behaviours, such as selecting a sustainable tourism option. One major problem with tourism research into the effectiveness of different strategies to encourage more sustainable tourist or guest behavior is a failure to recognize that that these two very different types of behaviour operate in two different cognitive processing systems, are explained by differ psychological concepts and theories and thus require different sorts of interventions (Moscardo, 2019). Stories are aimed at deliberative behaviours and exist within the deep processing, mindful version of dual processing (Wang et al., 2019) which is a fundamental concept in psychology (Powell et al., 2018).

## **CONCLUSION: SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FUTURES COVID AND BEYOND**

This chapter hopes to contribute to the new story of future tourism through increasing our understanding of how to use stories more effectively in the planning and management of tourism improving the relationships between tourism and sustainability. For tourism practitioners, especially those working in destination planning and management, there are opportunities to use stories to enhance tourism sustainability by creating destination storyworlds that support more sustainable tourist activities, that include more resident stories in tourism, and that explicitly tell stories of sustainability at and beyond the destination. Tourist practitioners can also enhance tourism sustainability by specifically seeking the future tourism stories of residents and using these to guide planning decisions and by encouraging residents to engage in both story telling and story co-creation. Finally, tourism practitioners can enhance tourism sustainability by assessing sustainability performance and telling success stories to tourists. These practices can be supported by research into how residents can think about tourism futures, how to effectively engage residents in storytelling and co-creation, how tourists respond to story based co-creation experience opportunities and how to best disseminate sustainability success stories.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen discussions amongst tourism academics reveal the existence of two different scenarios for the near future of tourism each with its own metaphor. Wicke and Bolghesi (2020) in their analysis of public discourse about the pandemic identify three dominant metaphors – Monster, Storm and Tsunami. In the tourism academic context one future scenario compares COVID 19 to a monster blocking the road to a promised land where travel is freely available to consumers ready to support the tourism business sector. Once the monster is defeated,

tourism can continue its march towards growth. In the alternative scenario the COVID-19 virus is a tsunami sweeping away the present, especially the problems of overtourism and climate change, offering an opportunity to rebuild a better tourism. Some argue that proponents of the first frame ignore many of the sustainability issues that tourism faces (Higgins-Desboilles, 2020). Equally, proponents of the second frame could be accused of downplaying the challenge of rebuilding a better tourism in a world where international tourism dependent destinations may have few other options and may need immediate financial relief from the problems encountered during the pandemic (Higgins-Desboilles, 2020). The challenge is to find a story of future tourism that acknowledges both the problems of unsustainable growth and the reality of needing some degree of commercial success. Stories might be an answer to this challenge.

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