



# ***THE*** **SUSTAINABLE BENEFITS** **TOURISM INITIATIVE (SBTI):**

## ***PRINCIPLES FOR RETHINKING TOURISM IN A POST-COVID WORLD***

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## Rethinking Tourism in a Post-Covid World

It is patently obvious that the global travel and tourism sector has been profoundly disrupted throughout the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. As a result, there is some question over whether it can ever return to what it was, and indeed, whether or not it *should*. With vaccinations providing at least *some* protection, attention is now turning to 'what next' in reference to potential destinations, especially those that are highly dependent on tourism.

This essay explores some of the principles and frameworks for the future of sustainable tourism that may assist in the planning of this latest recovery. It is an initial contribution, one we hope will soon emerge as a charter statement from a diverse group of individuals and associations who wish to see a new model of tourism—a preferred option that signals a departure from the low-cost / high-volume extractive one that came to dominate the pre-Covid tourism marketplace.

## Principles

### Principle 1: Sustainable Tourism Requires Systemic Redesign

Tourism is a system designed to create distinctive experiences that consumers (tourists) are willing to pay for. However, the capacity to offer experiences has been profoundly disrupted, and the future of tourism can no longer be created inside the usual system. Therefore, systems-thinking processes and design approaches are required to reimagine what might be possible in a world that has completely changed. Such approaches suggest that, at every level, the future of tourism is a journey (transition) that will be most effective if it organises around a shared story, or roadmap, to the future. In other words, the rebuilding of a different kind of tourism requires new frameworks for conversation, new strategies and new metrics.

Building on a series of important partnerships and deep demonstrations, the Sustainable Benefits Tourism Initiative (SBTI) has designed—and is evolving—a systems-thinking framework that creates:

- an argument or plan for change (the story);
- a deliberate process for learning about future options that might develop;
- a framework that integrates both of the above into a clear narrative and future roadmap that tourism policy makers, investors, operators and other stakeholders have both input into, and ownership of.

## Principle 2: Common Definition

In any given country, region or city there needs to be a common agreement about exactly what is meant by 'sustainable tourism'. Otherwise, those who are invested in both the present and the future of tourism lack a shared 'beginning place' or understanding in their conversations, and as a result, might well 'talk past' each other.

In explaining what the SBTI means by 'sustainable benefits tourism' (SBT), the authors have identified three broad positions that often co-opt the term 'sustainable' in tourism-related conversations and planning projects. None of the individual positions are necessarily right or wrong in themselves, but their differences in meaning lead to very different design and policy approaches.

**Position 1** uses 'sustainable' to mean a return to a level of tourism activity that any particular economy sees as necessary to sustain those parts of its population that have become dependent upon it. This may be defined as the ***getting it going again*** strategy.

**Position 2** uses 'sustainable' as a substitute word for green tourism and protecting those iconic values (clean beaches, lush rainforests, novel experiences) that tourists want. The impetus for this often comes as a reaction to the consequences of over-exploitative practices and more general concerns about the state of critical life systems. This may be defined as the ***protecting the values that tourists want and that the planet needs*** strategy.

**Position 3**, while incorporating components of positions 1 and 2, defines sustainable tourism on the premise that those who create the tourism experience should receive the majority of the benefits. In many instances this is not the case. One study, in a highly dependent tourism economy, recently reported that some 75% of all tourist revenues in normal times are repatriated offshore<sup>1</sup>. The notion of benefits, however, is not limited to purely financial ones. It seeks to ensure: that appropriate cultural traditions and customs are maintained; that infrastructures are sufficient to cope with the demands placed upon them (and the costs of both their establishment and maintenance are recovered from tourism revenues); and finally, that the generative and regenerative capacities of natural systems are protected. Under this definition the strategy might be best defined as **sustainable benefits tourism**.

Each of these positions is underpinned by different future intentions and differing understandings of the basis of the future of tourism (anticipation).

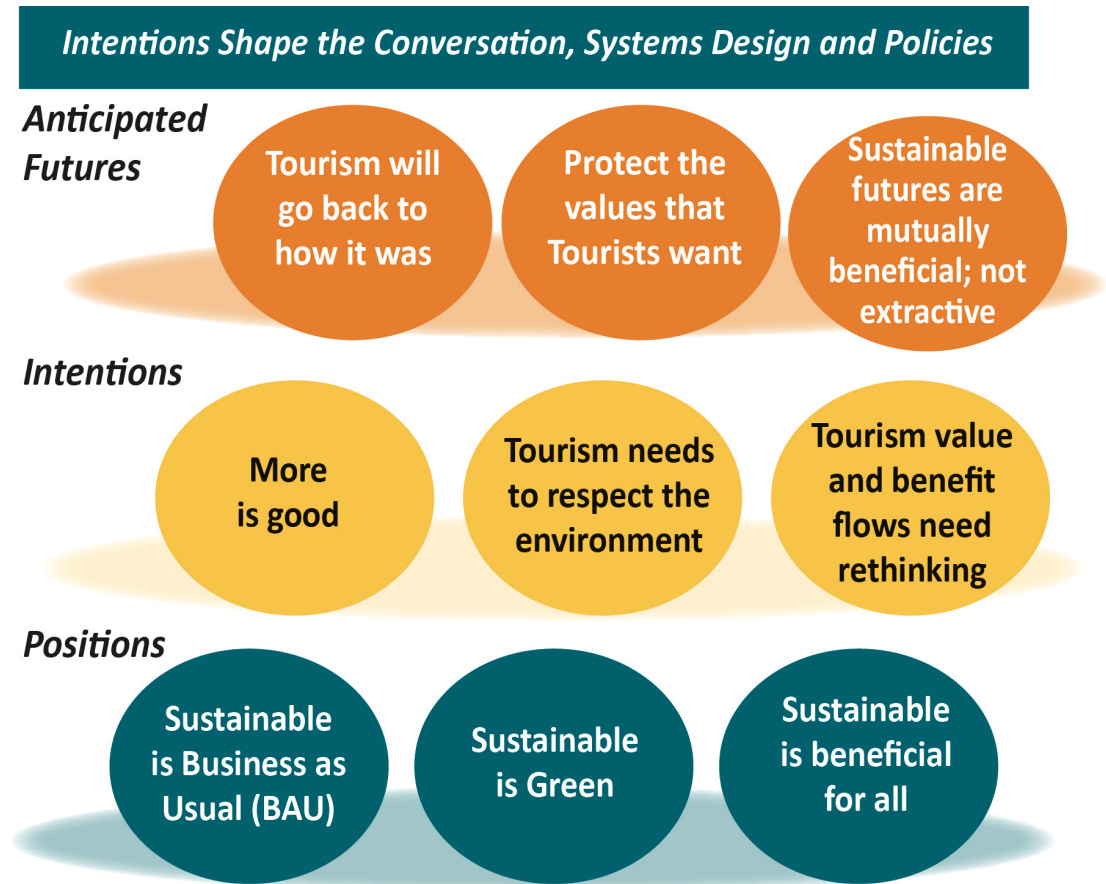


Figure 1: The shaping of Futures, Intentions and Positions.

### **Principle 3: The Map**

Assuming that any particular geography wishes to explore sustainable benefits tourism, it is important for those that are engaged in the conversation to agree on exactly where they think they are now, and what they need to explore and learn about that will help shape sustainable benefits tourism. In a sense, this is a shared map of the tourism space; a map that, given the upheavals and disruptions caused by the recent pandemic, can be argued as being critical to any planning conversation.

### **Principle 4: The Story or Narrative**

Once there is a shared map of the space it is then possible to explore future intentions and what challenges, or problems, might need to be addressed and resolved to bring those intentions into reality. The ambition of sustainable benefits tourism, together with the map, is that the intentions and the challenges together form a story, or narrative, that can then be used to engage all parts of the tourism sector and those who frame the policies related to it. The value of a powerful narrative is that it both acts as an attractor for particular directions, and gives the future of tourism a coherence that is not available otherwise. Some will wish to continue with a more formal engagement with any given SBT initiative, while others will simply align or modify what they are already doing in a less formal way.

## Principle 5: Learning About Options

Because sustainable benefits tourism is a deviation from low-cost, high-volume, extractive tourism, there will be a natural scepticism (and perhaps even opposition by vested interests) to such a proposition. The first steps in making SBT real should therefore be deliberately designed investments in exploration, learning, partnership and deep demonstration, before total commitment. We call these steps *options*, and a number of initiatives of a similar kind a *portfolio of options*. This process of option exploration is a different approach to both strategy and innovation<sup>ii</sup>. It is now being used by a number of cities throughout the world, and also in addressing a number of development issues across the planet.

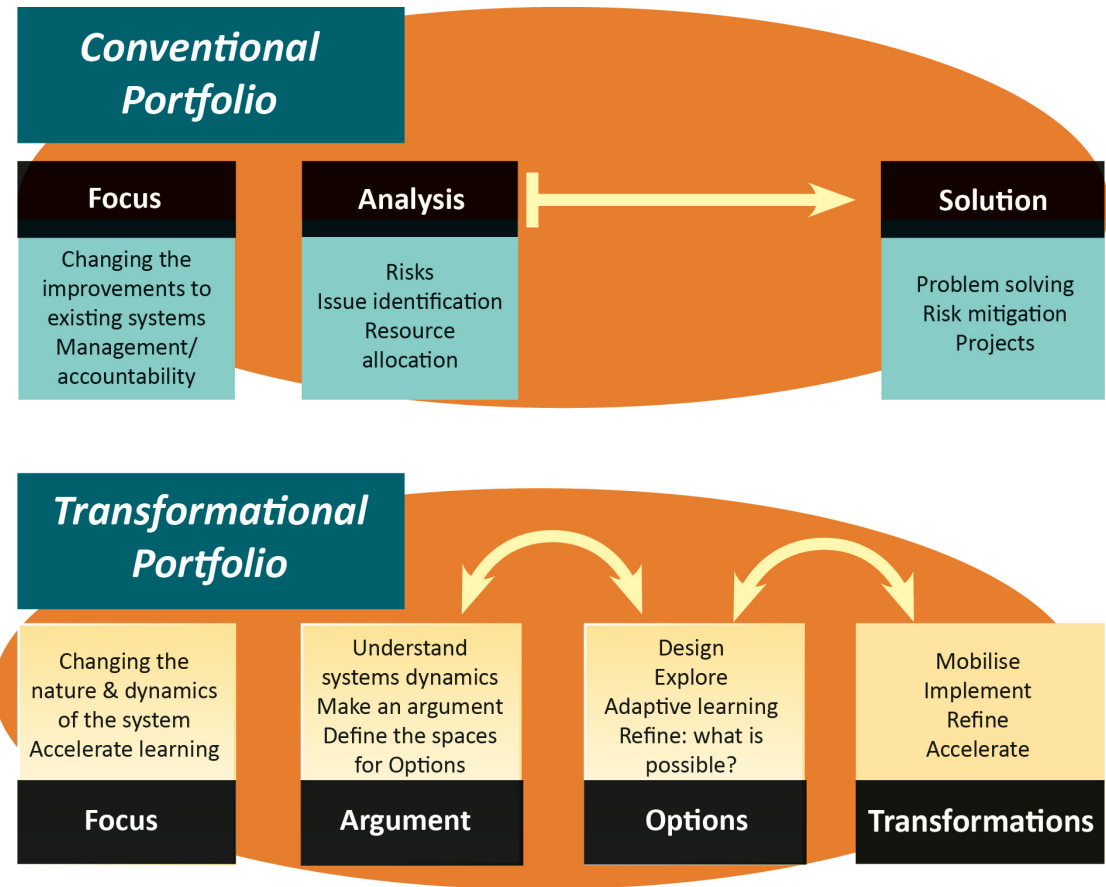


Figure 2: The Transformation Portfolio of Options

## Principle 6: Measuring What Matters

Sustainable benefits tourism is systemically different from the current model of tourism; therefore, it needs to measure different, yet complementary metrics to those that are currently and conventionally used. Since the 1950s, when records of international arrivals were first kept for example, statistical measures have mostly been of the number and origin of arrivals at a frontier or a destination along with some aggregate expenditure figures. The trap inherent in these gross measures of inbound tourism activity is that equal statistical weight is given to each arrival, irrespective of the other factors that define their behaviours and relative value. With digital identification (passports, ID cards), the movement of travellers into and within a destination can be easily determined and indeed, as a security measure, already is. With appropriate anonymisation of such data, the dispersion of traveller flows can be effectively quantified and mapped, adding substantially to the information required for the effective management of those visitors.

This dispersion of traveller flows then facilitates the development of metrics that highlight not only the ratio of local to export profit flows (v. foreign exchange), but also the contribution of tourism spend to supporting infrastructures, and the allocation of funds into sustaining—and where necessary remediating—critical environments and cultural values.



## Principle 7: Making the Business Case

While the process of deliberately exploring options should always continue, as successful outcomes appear they can be integrated into a 'sustainable benefits tourism roadmap', together with the identification of key initiatives that, through their effects on the existing tourism offering, will begin to change the nature of the system itself (a sort of systemic acupuncture process). In keeping with the idea that benefits have multiple aspects, this future roadmap must of course be multi-layered and highly dynamic.

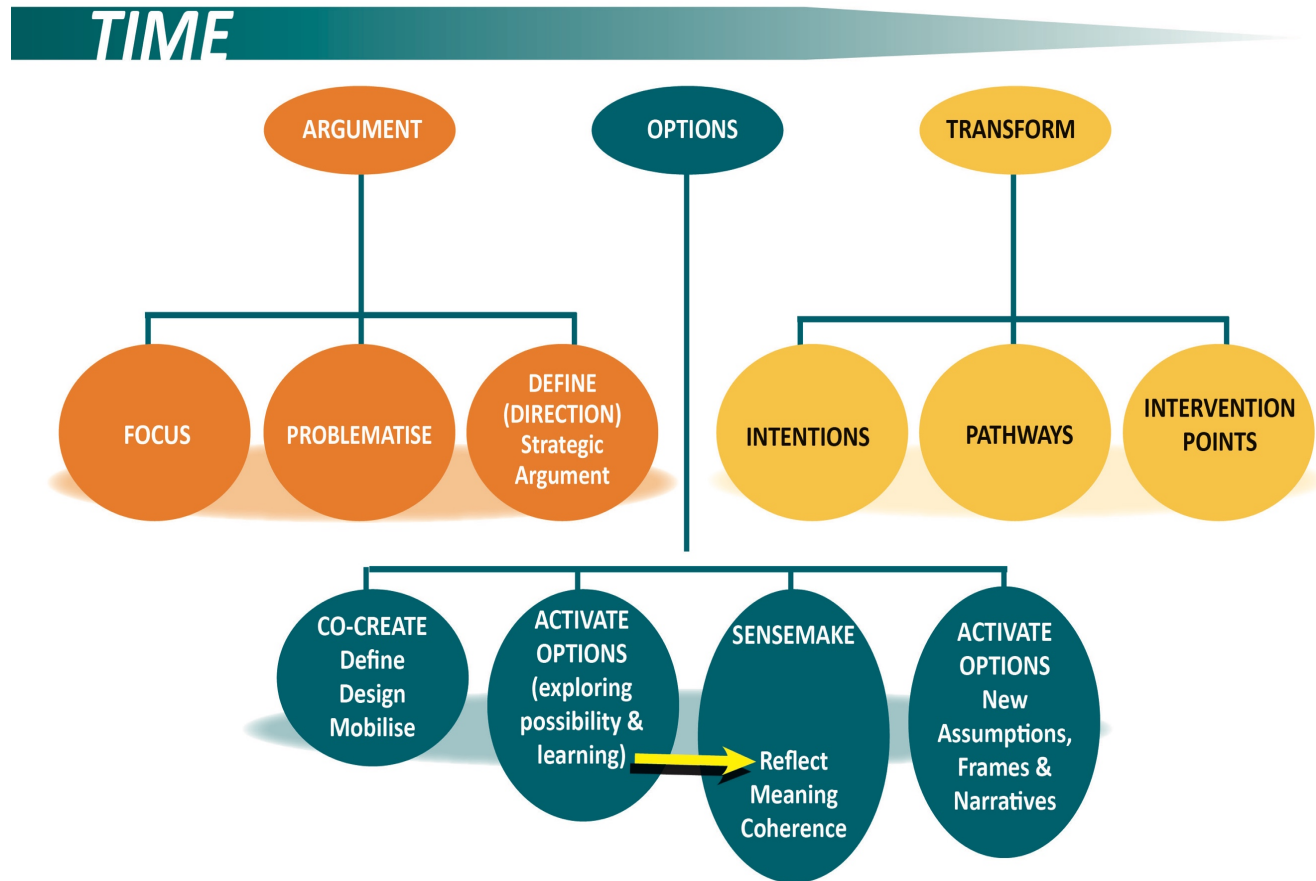


Figure 3: The Transformational Journey Timeline

## Principle 8. The Future is Visual

In order to engage as widely as possible with tourism communities, all parts of any SBT journey need to be reflected in visual representations that people can understand, reflect upon and easily modify. The SBTI therefore is building both capacities and demonstrations of these representations and is also establishing a resource pool that can be easily accessed from anywhere.

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<sup>i</sup> Source: ABC Foreign Correspondent, March 9 2021, *Tomorrow will be better*. <https://iview.abc.net.au/video/NC2110H006S00>

<sup>ii</sup> The Netherlands based Chôra Foundation have provided active thought leadership in options based frameworks, and the process (as used in the Finance Sector) is also described in The Routledge Companion to Strategic Risk Management (2016), and in their recent Green Paper on *The future of Development Options* <https://www.chora.foundation/stories/green-paper-the-future-of-development-make-happen-with-portfolios-of-options> .