How Slow is 'Slow'? Dilemmas of Slow Tourism

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Abstract: This conceptual paper presents a discussion on the concept of 'Slow Tourism', which has been conceived as an 'antidote' to the evolving 'fast' travel lifestyles adopted in the constantly accelerating lives of present day time impoverished societies. The paper elaborates upon the importance of how slow travel and tourism is evolving in the interest of gaining quality tourism experiences that are also instrumental in facilitating sustainability of socio-cultural and physical environment. Through a scrutiny of each composite aspect of slow tourism, the discussion in the paper brings to light the seemingly paradoxical concerns of slowing down in fast times, ultimately questioning if slow tourism can be realizable in its true sense.

Introduction

Ever since industrialization, the 'fast revolution' has gained momentum and has drastically transformed lifestyles into a 'fast mode', 'on-the-go' lifestyle (Joseph & Singh, 2013) creating demand for everything easy, speedy and instant. To facilitate lives transforming towards time compression and micro time, 'fast' is now available everywhere in our surroundings, visible in fast transport, fast technology, fast gadgets, fast facilities, fast services, fast food and fast communication, among others, all of which are attracting people towards the 'fast lane' of life (Wajcman, 2008).

This 'fast' revolution has permeated into the domain of travel for leisure as well. Positively, the advent of fast modes of transport has enabled speedier; long distance; time bound journeys; adding to the convenience of travel. On the other hand, negatively, the increasing speed has become the prime cause of extricating the 'experiential' component from the journeys undertaken, hence making travel of contemporary times distinctly different from that of bygone eras. The ill effects of 'fast'/ 'speed' are seen in the fact that the depth of travel experiences gained through attachment formed between the traveler, places and people on the journey, has become inversely proportional to hectic pace of the journey undertaken. In the present 'time constrained' societies, travel of tourists characterized by a 'fast journey' to and fro the destination, and hurried consumption at the destination, continues to conspicuously

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highlight the growing 'disinterest' of tourists in learning and appreciation of natural environs, people and culture of places visited. Such increasing 'disengagement' and 'detachment', perceived as 'unwholesome' for the tourist and 'damaging' for the destination, has prompted the evolution of a counteractive form of travel under the banner of 'slow tourism' (Markwell, Wilson & Fullagar, 2012).

'Slow tourism' is a form of alternate tourism that revolves around the core principle of advocating to the tourists, the importance of slowing down to a desired pace that is ideal for savoring the flavor of travel; promotes appreciation of, and is instrumental in protecting the environs; and leads to culmination of memorable and quality tourist experience.

However, in contemporary times of ever increasing 'time poverty' (slowmovement.com) constantly afflicting the global population, several challenges stand in the face of actualizing this relatively new concept of going 'slow'. In an attempt to address the particular challenges of slowing down, this conceptual paper presents a discussion on slow tourism and illuminates the dilemmas and concerns that are important to determine the viability of this new form of alternate tourism.

Background

The much famous 'slow movement' started in Italy in 1986, as a brainchild of Carlo Petrini. Petrini's conceived the idea of 'slow' as a reaction opposing 'fast food' that was introduced through the opening of a McDonald fast food chain unit in Italy. Opposing the inroads made by the global fast food chain, he argued that local gastronomic richness should be preserved, organically grown and locally available seasonal fresh food should be consumed, traditional slow cooking style should be practiced, and food should be consumed leisurely (than be rushed with) in order to savor the distinct flavor of the cuisine. Gradually the philosophy of 'slow' became widely acceptable and appealing, and thence filtered into many other aspects of life, creating several new labels that are now identified with the prefix 'slow', viz. 'slow leisure', 'slow transport', 'slow city', 'low interaction', etc.

The continuous evolution of new concepts of 'slow' under the banner of the 'slow movement' is being noticed significantly in the last few decades. In essence, the aim of all 'slow' forms is centered on prompting a 'natural rhythm of life' at a 'right pace', a pace that is ideal to experience a meaningful 'quality' in everything, ultimately enhancing the overall 'quality of life'. Honore's (2004) work, '*In Praise of Slowness*', is a remarkable example that has won worldwide acclaim in the context of 'slow'. Through his work, Honore lambasted the cult of speed and admonished people against their obsession with everything fast in the modern world. Disapproving of the growing 'fast' culture, he argued in favor of encouraging the return to the original idea of 'slowness in life'.

The extension of the slow philosophy into the phenomenon of tourism became apparent with the birth of 'slow tourism' as one of the offspring of the 'slow movement' (Gardner 2009; Salvo, Mogollon & Di Clemente, 2013). With respect to travel and tourism, Krippendorf (1984) was one of the earliest scholars to highlight the importance of 'slowness'. He advised people to take relaxed, enjoyable and environmentally friendly holidays, suggesting they should 'switch off their time machine, take off the watch, get rid of time pressure, the deadline, the agenda' (Krippendorf, 1984: p. 131). In a way, Krippendorf propounded the idea of 'escape from time' (Lumsdon and McGrath, 2011: p. 265).

As a distinct term, 'slow tourism' evolved in 1990s. Thereafter, the concept has been continuously gaining popularity. A number of reasons are responsible for the evolution of slow tourism. These include, a growing concern towards negative impacts from mass tourism; the asocial trend of withdrawal of tourists into their isolated worlds in a packaged 'environment bubble', and a fast spreading superficial consumerist culture attached to material possessions and comforts, which though facilitates travel, distances and detaches the tourist from his surroundings, resulting in an overall shallow tourist experience. Hence, slowing down in the interest of environment and quintessential experiences rests at the core of slow tourism.

In the last two decades, the importance of this relatively new concept has become notably evident with the increasing occurrence and usage of the term 'slow tourism', in tourism vocabulary. Slow tourists willingly opt for lack of speed/slowing down their travel, in the interest of regard for environment and the quest for seeking authentic, quality, travel experiences. As a consciously designed form of alternate travel, slow tourism has gained ground particularly in Europe, where 'slow travelers' already constitute 10% of the holiday market (Lumdson & McGrath, 2011).

Reflecting Gardner's (2009) view that slow travel is about 'deceleration' rather than speed, slow tourism is characterized by use of slow transport, participation in slow and low impact tourists activities, and establishing slow and meaningful interactions (Dickinson *et al.*, 2011; Heitmann *et al.*, 2011). In essence, guided by the tenet of 'immersion' slow travel emphasizes the principles of 'taking time' and 'attachment' to a particular place (Buckley, 2011; Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011) through engagement, appreciation and thereby cultivation of personalized connections with people, environs and places.

Proponents of slow tourism have identified several principles of slow tourism. A website on slow travel (thewayofslowtravel.com) outlines ten principles for decelerating the speed of life i.e. (1) slow down, (2) stretch your comfort zone, (3) simplify, (4) let go of the plan, (5) spend less, (6) take root, (7) blend in, (8) rely on strangers, (9) practice gratitude, and (10) celebrate the ordinary. Dall' Aglio (2011) suggests that slow tourism can be explained by the acronym 'CASTLE'. The six dimensions of CASTLE are, (1) Contamination-signifying meaningful opportunities of exchange, (2) Authenticity-seeking the genuine and original, (3) Sustainability-of environment and culture, (4) Tempo-indicating pace of activity that facilitates comprehension and appreciation, (5) Length-giving time to avail a quality experience at the right pace, and (6) Emotion-connected with memorable experiences.

Although the concept of slow tourism has started attracting interest, it is still at a nascent stage, and is yet to gain wide acknowledgement. The present paper addresses the dimensions of 'slow' as incorporated in slow travel.

The ensuing discussion begins with addressing the term 'slow tourism', as an entity in itself. It then continues to examine 'slow' with respect to each component of slow travel, bringing to light certain issues and dilemmas of 'going slow' that are detrimental to the emergence of 'slow tourism' as a distinct entity. The thorough examination of the concept also eventually questions if going slow can be made acceptable to the tourists, and if at all, slowing down is attainable and viable in view of the constantly accelerating fast pace of life (Nijkamp & Baaijens, 1999) of contemporary times.

Slow Tourism - A New Nomenclature?

Though the term 'slow tourism' is becoming increasingly visible in tourism vocabulary, a prime apprehension is, whether the creation of this new 'terminology' is necessary at all? The

argument for adding the term 'slow' with tourism, has primarily reinforced the concept of sustainable tourism as an 'antidote' to mass tourism (Conway & Timmis, 2010; Markwell, Wilson & Fullagar, 2012; Millington, 2011; Peters, 2012). However, in opposition to mass tourism, and to favor the cause of preservation of natural and socio cultural environment through practice of 'low impact' tourism, the term 'alternate tourism' has already existed in tourism literature since long (Butler, 1990). Alternate tourism preaches the very principles that slow tourism claims to espouse, viz. responsible and educated tourists visiting places for gaining understanding and experiences, not seeking the usual 'touristy comforts', and having a genuine interest in immersion in nature and culture, with a negligible possibility of any negative impact on the places visited (Hall & Lew, 2009).Similar to alternate tourism, slow tourism encourages people to travel at a 'natural pace' to 'connect' and 'engage' with places for attainment of a quality 'experience', and have minimal impact. Hence, the label 'slow tourism' comes merely as 'yet another form of alternate tourism'. This raises a pertinent question i.e. whether it is necessary to confuse people in mere semantics by creation of further additional adjectives of niche tourism or merely coining additional new terminology? Such an apprehension calls for serious examination of the concept of slow tourism (Markwell *et al.*, 2012).

As the term "slow" has already made its inroads in tourism, it is important to gain insight into the manner in which 'slow' is being incorporated in, and associated with the whole phenomenon of tourism.

Slow Cities and Slow Tourism

In the form of a tourism product, 'slow destinations/cities' are evolving around the globe as distinct products to attract 'slow' tourists. Slow cities under the banner of 'Cittaslow' (Mayer & Knox, 2006; Miele, 2008; Pink, 2007) are a creation attributed to Petrini's principles of pleasure before profit; human beings before head office; and slowness before speed – all of which call for actual slowing down of life to a natural comfortable speed. A quiet, relaxed and peaceful atmosphere that supports unhurried living is characteristic of slow cities. The earliest slow cities emerged in Italy and having initially spread across Europe, have now mushroomed right across the globe reaching far and wide to America and Korea. According to Dickinson and Lumsdon (2010) there are over 100 *Slow Cittas* in the world. The slowness in these cities is measured on indicator categories, viz. environmental policies; infrastructure policies; quality of urban life policies; agricultural, touristic and artisan policies; policies for hospitality; awareness and training, social cohesion and partnerships etc. The cities have developed on the core value of self-sufficiency on local resources. With respect to tourism, slow cities can be destination attractions for those tourists whose travel motivation is to 'escape' the hustle-bustle and stressful life of their hometown, in order to enjoy a vacation at a leisurely pace.

However, the evolution of 'slow cities' in relation to slow tourism raises serious dilemmas as well. In times marked by continually speedy industrial developments, mechanization, digitization, and the desire of man to 'have everything easy and quick', the genesis of, or transformation of cities into 'slow' is debatable. Maintaining of cities as 'slow' is more feasible in places where the development is already at a gradual pace, or else not possible, because of geographical or other limitations that make the pace of life inadvertently slow in origin. Particularly, remote, not easily accessible and underdeveloped places in rural, mountain, island or peripheral geographical locations are the ones that are ideally suitable to maintain as a slow city attractions, as they are geographically 'far away' and cannot be easily influenced by

forces of globalization and development. But, to consciously slow down, or actually attempt to transform fast cities into slow, brings up a major challenge as it may be perceived as moving 'backwards' or in the direction of 'de-growth'. Besides, particularly for tourists coming from developed, fast and happening city lifestyles, a visit to a city having slow tempo, may come as a refreshing welcome break only for an initial while, but invariably the slowness comes to be considered as 'boring', and 'lifeless', with the increasing duration of one's stay in the slow city. Hence, the targeted market for slow tourism that should ideally be a 'long stay market' (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010) may end up as 'short stay' market on account of the 'slowness'. This may defeat the very purpose of slow tourism in slow cities.

When slow destinations and activities become attractions, tourists interested in engaging in slow leisure are motivated to travel to these attractions. Here comes the factor of form of accessibility/travel and transport.

Slow Transport and Slow Tourism

Slow transport is the most important component of slow tourism as it propagates use of modes of travel that have minimal CO_2 emission. Dickinson and Lumsdon (2010) concur that slow travel is an 'emerging conceptual framework which offers an alternative to air and car travel, where people travel to destinations more slowly overland' (p.2). Slow transport in the interest of minimizing the greenhouse gas emission impact on the environment. Slow travel has two distinct aspects of slow transport, i.e. (1) transport used 'for reaching the destination'; and (2) transport used 'at the destination'.

Establishing a relation between transport and destinations chosen for travel, the tenet of slow tourism suggests that tourists should choose to visit places 'not very far away from home', i.e. they should undertake 'short haul' travel (Hall, 2009) so that they can consciously avoid the use of fast means of transport. Slow tourism propagates that in particular, air transport should be avoided as it is the prime cause of environment pollution and climate change (Bows, Anderson, & Peeters, 2009; Dickinson, Lumsdon & Robbins, 2011; Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011). Advocates of slow tourism are of the view that 'carbon friendly' alternative modes of transport (road or rail) should be opted (Dubois and Ceron, 2006). Slow surface transport must be preferred as it can provide the opportunity for the traveler to flow at ease through nature, appreciating the landscapes and locales en route the journey. Besides, slow transport should be chosen as it can be instrumental in facilitating a meaningful connection with travel companions or other travelers and locals.

In terms of movement 'at the destination', Dickinson and Lumsdon (2010) opine that slow travel should imply 'unhurried' travel, a relaxed movement not bound by time schedules and strict sightseeing itineraries. It should involve 'soft mobility', to explore a destination on foot, or perhaps cycling (rather than atop a tourist bus). Acknowledging due importance of 'walking' as a form of going slow, the concept of 'pedestrianization' of cities has already gained popularity (largely in Europe), and encourages people to walk in the interest of one's health, preservation of environment and for establishing a direct meaningful connection with nature. In a way, pedestrianization too encourages a similar view regarding slow, as suggested by Yurtseven and Kaya (2011) i.e. taking time and attachment to a particular place so that tourists change their pace, 'to look' rather than 'to see', in order to 'experience' rather than 'endure' a destination (Matos, 2004). As 'time' is intrinsic to gaining experiences, due time should be given to 'travel to' and 'travel at' the destination.

In wake of rising environmental concerns with regard to negative impacts from tourism, a trend notable of late is that tourists have gradually started becoming environmentally conscious by opting for 'eco friendly' travel and tourism. However, while conscientious tourists do claim to slow down in favor of eco friendly tourism, such claims seem contentious if tourists themselves choose to arrive at a destination-travelling fast (usually by air, to save time), and after arriving at the destination, opt to slowdown and engage in responsible tourism. Such a journey often overshadows the fact that in order to save the time on the 'to and fro' journey fast transport has been used – that has caused its part of damage through carbon emissions and has eventually defeated the very purpose of slowing down.

Therefore, in the present 'time constrained' lives, where leisure is subject to strict, limited vacation time (days off), and people have no choice but to squeeze in the maximum leisure and pleasure in minimum time, motivating people to opt for slow transport remains a major challenge. Further, if a journey entails the dual components of fast travel to the destination; and later, slow travel at the destination; the question of whether such travel can qualify to be slow tourism, remains unanswered. Rather, it triggers a further question as to which component of slow travel is imperative to qualify for slow tourism, i.e. on the way, at the destination, or both?

After arriving at the destinations, the next component that comes into play is choice of accommodation that ideally suits slow tourists.

Slow Accommodation and Slow Tourism

Slow accommodation in slow tourism can be closely associated with the concept of 'homestay' tourism (Buckley, 2011). Homestay accommodation is ideal for providing the tourists with an authentic 'home like', stay at the place visited (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Rivers, 1998). The idea is that tourist are accommodated with a host family so that they can experience a 'home away from home' and learn the ways of another's existence through spending slow and leisurely time with a host family, in a different culture/environment, and also immerse in local life in the midst of informal genuine settings. The ingredients of homestay accommodation include aspects of 'slow' like 'slow lifestyle', 'slow and soft tourist activities', 'slow food' (preferably organic and grown locally) cooked in traditional style, a homely ambience, informal and personalized 'quality interactions' with the host family and local community. All these aspects of 'slow' in a homestay contribute to a gradual brewing of quality experiences that can get slowly and deeply absorbed in the minds of tourists (Jamal *et al.*, 2011) and also contribute favourably to the local community and economy (Buckley, 2011; Heitmann *et al.*, 2011).

Other similar forms of slow accommodation are labeled under the banner of 'eco lodges', 'eco resorts' and 'farmstays' that also have in them the element of slow. Such accommodations are opted by tourists who wish to engage in eco friendly activates amidst nature-based settings, than have a desire or demand for commercialized and institutionalized entertainment/engagement at the destination. Hence, the activity component in any kind of slow accommodation is more 'knowledge and learning based' than 'fun based'.

However, the concern with regard to slow accommodation is that most tourists (other than backpackers), due to being governed by clock bound lives, personal and professional engagements, usually have only limited time to spend at a destination. If the tourists are not staying for long at a destination, cultivation of quality interactions is not always possible, as the host and guest may barely get time to 'defreeze' and open up with each other, than develop a real understanding of each others' lifestyles. Hence, due to lack of time, interactions may remain merely formal and superficial. Besides, in other slow accommodation units that are operating more like commercial establishments (i.e. eco lodges etc.) immersion in nature gains priority over other components of slow experiences. Thus the role of slow accommodation in contributing to slow experiences comes into question.

The nature of consumer behavior of tourists in terms of slow tourism is understood to be strikingly different from that of the conventional tourists, and thus needs an insight to identify the unique characteristics of the slow tourist market segment.

Slow Consumerism and Slow Tourism

'Slow movement' propagates 'downshifting' (slowmovement.com), i.e. cutting down on demands for goods, comforts, luxuries and consumerism, thereby backtracking towards 'simple lifestyle'. It focuses on minimizing mass consumption of globally available products and services in favour of attending to details of the less, rare and authentic. In terms of tourism, slow consumerism goes hand in hand with 'sustainable/minimalistic consumption' and emphasizes 'de-growth' (Hall, 2009; Lorek & Fuchs, 2011). It implies that tourists should travel in a simplistic manner, at ease, without seeking typical touristy comforts, and should engage in places, as they inherently and originally exist.

Slow tourism propagates 'stress free' travel behaviour. The personality characteristics of a slow tourist are similar to that of the 'explorer' typology of Cohen (1972) or that of a 'backpack' tourist (Cohen, 2003; Hannam & Ateljevic, 2008; Sorensen, 2003), i.e. a 'carefree' traveler. The travel behavior of slow tourists has elements of ample leisurely time, freedom of spontaneous indulgence, and a willingness of harmonious immersion in the cultural flow of place. 'Gap year' tourists and 'voluntourists' exhibit this carefree and relaxed behavior that is typically characteristic of 'slow'.

However, propagating to reduce consumerism in a consumerist era raises obvious issues. In times of persistently accelerating pace of life which continues to create a growing demand and a parallel supply of products and services, the question that arises is, are tourists willing to downshift (even for a few days) in the interest of slow tourism? Convincing, or else expecting tourists to do without possessions and comforts that they consider imperative, may well be understood as asking them to travel handicapped. For the well-equipped, modern day, technology dependent and demanding traveler, it is a great challenge and near impossibility to accept certain ways of slow travel, e.g. choose to travel without virtual connectivity, not expect conveniences like air conditioning or a satellite television, or else agree to adjust with mere basic available provisions in the interest of slow tourism. Hence, if 'downshifting' is a major principle of slow tourism, it needs to be identified if there is a significant segment of tourists who are willing to strictly conform to slow consumerist behaviour.

Finally, as the ultimate idea behind slow tourism is slowing down for the attainment of 'quality tourist experiences' and maintain a long term 'quality environment', sustainability with relation to slow tourism draws attention.

Sustainability and Slow Tourism

Slow tourism has been conceived with the aim of sustainability as its core principle (Conway & Timmis, 2010; Lumdson & McGrath 2011; Weaver, 2012). Slow tourism is regarded as 'low impact' tourism on the premise that slowing down minimizes the negative impact on environ-

ment and society. Slow tourists ideally involve 'long stay' and 'low impact tourists'. Nevertheless, the dilemma arises in the very explanation of slow tourists, with the argument that the long stay of tourists undoubtedly may result in more socio-cultural and environmental impact at the destination. This impact becomes a matter of concern, particularly if it is 'negative socio- cultural' impact. It has already been seen in many countries (India, Thailand, South Africa, Australia etc.) around the world, that long term budget backpackers (Riley, 1988) particularly the ones who engage in drug pedaling, or indulge in undesirable and often antisocial behavior (Aziz, 1999; Bellis *et al.*, 2007) are the cause of serious negative impacts on the vulnerable local population and societies. Hence, the influence of such long stay slow tourists (e.g. backpackers) often ends up bringing more negative impact at a destination. Therefore slow tourism, as low impact tourism, also comes under the scanner raising serious aspersions, as not all characteristics of slow tourism are always strictly 'low impact' and this warrants an inquiry into the relation between slow tourism and sustainability (Dodds, 2012).

By addressing each aspect of slow tourism, the above discussion has provided an insight into the new concept and has highlighted significant issues that question the achievability of the phenomenon of slow tourism in its entirety.

Conclusion

Slow tourism revolves around the idea of tourists slowing down to a desired pace so that they can value the journey, sense and soak in the sights, sounds and aromas of places travelled through/to, take time to appreciate the environment, and gain deep insight into the culture of places by having a meaningful interaction with host population. Eventually slow travel should result in the culmination of memorable 'quality' tourist experiences as opposed to merely becoming a count destinations, visa stamps, souvenirs, cliché touristy photographs or innumerable status updates from airport lounges, coffee shops or hotels.

However the travel behavior of tourists who claim to be in favour of, and opt for this particular new form of niche tourism, often seems to have in it elements paradoxical to going slow (Howard, 2012), eventually defeating the very aim of 'slow' tourism. Research argues that in times of easily and widely available 'package tourism', where speedy travel by air to destinations forms an integral component of the package, tourists are not willing to give up on fast travel to save travel time (Barr *et al.*, 2010; Randles & Mander, 2009). For the tour operators attracting the market for slow, it is important to both investigate the profile of slow tourists and identify the opportunities of slow tourism (Heitmann *et al.*, 2011). This is especially so in terms of evaluation of the services offered and package components in order to determine if the nature of slow experiences promised (in holiday packages) are actually fulfilling the experiential dimension of respect, preservation and engagement with the authentic physical and social environment.

No doubt the concept of slow tourism is academically new and engaging, it piques curiosity to raise pertinent questions with regard to whether slowing down is possible 'at all' in a continuously fast moving world, ultimately questioning the viability of slow tourism. The discussion concludes that a deep insight into travel behavior termed as 'slow' may reveal serious inconsistencies between the idea of slow and actual practice of slow. It remains difficult to determine what strict parameters can characterize a particular travel phenomenon under the label of 'slow', and hence future research needs to probe the same. Research also needs to investigate how much and to what extent tourists are able to embrace all elements of slow

in their travel behavior. Besides, for proponents of slow tourism, i.e. researchers, planners and developers, there is a need to seriously deliberate and identify whether 'slow tourism' is merely an addition of new terminology in the tourism vocabulary or a form of tourism that can evolve into a distinct niche sector.

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