

Slow tourism travel for a lower carbon future

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Abstract

One future holiday travel scenario is that of 'slow travel' where air and car travel are rejected in favour of forms of transport with lower greenhouse gas emissions. This study explored how contemporary European tourism travel practices and norms of travel behaviour might be adapted to alternative ways of conceptualising holidays using slow travel. The research used in-depth interviews to analyse holiday travel discourse and travel identity. When people talk about their holiday travel they employ a variety of credibility enhancing moves such as criticising other modes and constructing their own transport positively. In relation to climate change, it is evident that people, while concerned, currently lack the agency to act and there are powerful discourses that displace individual commitment and delegate responsibility to institutional actors. While of interest to participants, slow travel would not be readily accepted as a substitute to air or car travel in many contexts. This is because, to a large extent, many destinations and holiday practices currently require engagement with specific sets of travel structures. A rethink of holiday practices and the way tourism interfaces with transport is needed. This requires industry engagement, and key messages about slow travel, to be useful, need to be influential early in the holiday decision making process. The study has provided a foundation for further work on the concept of slow travel and the application of a discourse analysis approach to travel behaviour.

The Research

The current growth in air travel is questionable in the context of climate change and suggests a need for research to focus on alternative forms of tourism transport. The term slow travel originates from the slow food movement. It has featured in the media as an alternative to air travel and there is also growing slow travel movement which encourages people to travel to destinations more slowly overland, holiday in one place, stay longer and travel less. As the term is relatively new, the following was proposed as a working definition:

Holiday travel involving shorter trips (distance) and longer stays (time) where air transport is rejected in favour of more environmentally benign forms of overland transport which become incorporated as part of the holiday experience.

The study employed a discourse perspective. The analysis was interested in how discourses of holiday travel are used and how this enables or constrains what people do. Thus, this study drew on a form of analysis hitherto little utilised in the transport field that has the potential to yield new insights. The research objectives were:

- to identify the available discourses of mainstream and new models of alternative slow travel tourism, to analyse how these discourses are used, and to explore how the discourses enable or constrain holiday travel choices
- to explore the travel identities presented by the discourses used to describe holiday travel practices
- to analyse peoples' explanation of travel behaviour in relation to their understanding of climate change
- to undertake preliminary analysis of the opportunities presented by new models of slow travel for the widespread adoption of more carbon efficient travel identities for the lower carbon future

Data were collected using two phases of in-depth interviews conducted before and after a European holiday. In total 16 participants (including some pairs of participants) were recruited to encompass both mainstream and slow travellers. Following the first interview, materials on the participant's destination and potential for alternative travel options was compiled and an estimate made of the relative carbon footprint of options. The second interview focused on the actual travel experience and adopted a more challenging approach in relation to climate change based on the potential for use of alternative modes of transport. Following a period of immersion in the data, codes, based on the researcher's interest and derived from the data, were used to provide a guide for analysis. Analysis then focused on what participants were trying to achieve in their explanations of modal choice and reflections on climate change.

Key Findings

A number of conclusions can be drawn. First slow travel is far from a clear concept and has been interpreted in a variety of different ways. It is not necessarily interpreted as an environmentally benign form of holiday, although this is an added bonus. While this is not a problem for the concept to provide a useful, alternative way of thinking about holidays, there are interpretations that are less than optimal for reducing the climate change impact of tourism.

A variety of discursive strategies were used by participants to justify their modal choice. There are positive discourses about slow travel, such as the special engagement with people and place, and there is potential to develop new stories about holiday travel which guide people to more sustainable practices. Conversely there are discourses that maintain unsustainable practice, such as the coherence of the argument for flying; however, these are challenged by strong negative discourses about flying. It is not clear to what extent identity plays a role in travel decisions. Participants were found to be engaging in distinct travel practices that were largely context specific but, as individuals, they were frequently engaging in quite a diverse range of travel practices in different contexts. In relation to climate change, two main themes were apparent: the power to act; and ambivalence. The former includes reflections on 'politics preventing progress' and 'scientific scepticism' which provide a good defence strategy for taking no action. Similarly, under the ambivalence theme, expressing green credentials in other areas of life was a common mechanism to displace responsibility. Together these provide useful strategies for taking no meaningful action.

The potential of slow travel, while of interest to participants, is currently far from realisable. Pervasive discourses about holiday travel together with existing holiday and travel structures suggest a radical rethink of holiday travel practice is needed. This requires industry engagement, and key messages about slow travel, to be useful, need to be influential early in the holiday decision making process prior to key decisions being taken. There is a need for political action and clear scientific messages to raise public awareness of climate change. People are concerned, but uncertain, and there is currently too much scope for prevarication. Therefore a final recommendation is the need to develop a solid scientific understanding of the relative environmental impacts of different holiday practices to inform policy, practice and the public.

The analysis is ongoing and further details will emerge in journal publications at a later date.

Final budget and explanation

Item	Budget	Actual spend
Research Assistant - collate materials on destinations and travel options	585	585
Travel for interviews	200	124
Transcription of interviews	1200	1200
Participant recruitment using local advertising	300	300
1000 promotional leaflets	400	400
TOTAL	2685	2609

An incident report

No incidents to report.

Details of presentations, publications and other outputs

Conference papers to be presented at:

- Transport and Tourism Research Association, European Chapter Annual Conference - Transport and Tourism: Challenges, issues and conflicts. Rotterdam and Breda, 22-24 April 2009.
- RGS-IBG Annual International Conference - Manchester, 26-28 August 2009 in the session on 'Alternative Travel Futures' sponsored by the Transport Geographers Research Group.

Journal articles are in progress for:

- Annals of Tourism Research (submission planned for early summer 2009)
- Journal of Transport Geography (submission planned for autumn 2009)

Other

- Non-technical report and promotional leaflet available at:
<http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/ictlr/slowtravel.html>