



Slow Tourism Travel for a Lower Carbon Future

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Introduction

What role does climate change play in holiday travel decisions? How can we encourage more sustainable holiday travel? Is slow travel a realistic alternative and what might encourage people to choose slow travel?

These are just some of the questions that provided the rationale for undertaking research into slow travel. Slow travel or slow tourism has been one response of the tourism industry to climate change concerns. It has featured in the media as an alternative to air travel and there is also a growing slow travel movement which encourages people to travel to destinations more slowly overland, holiday in one place, stay longer and travel less. In recognition of the need to investigate this topic, the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) has supported this study. The research sought to explore the opportunities presented by slow travel for a lower carbon future.

The Research

The research aim was to explore how established international tourism travel practices, with high greenhouse gas emissions, might be adapted to alternative ways of thinking about holidays in the future when we will have to use less fossil fuels.

The following working definition was proposed for slow travel:

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

The study sought the views of both mainstream and slow travellers and focused on the way people talk about their holiday travel. Between June and October 2008, in-depth interviews were conducted before and, in most cases, after a European holiday with 16 participants (including some pairs of participants). 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 the various options. The second interview focused on the actual travel experience, presented participants with information about their carbon footprint and discussed the potential for use of alternative modes of transport. The analysis was focused on how people talk about holiday travel and how this enables or constrains what people do.

The Findings

The research explored five areas:

- what slow travel means to people
- the stories about mainstream and slow travel, how these stories are used, and how they enable or constrain holiday travel choices
- the effect holiday travel choices have on our image of ourselves and how others see us
- peoples' explanation of travel behaviour in relation to their understanding of climate change
- the opportunities presented by slow travel and the barriers for adoption of more carbon efficient travel

1. Slow travel

Slow travel is far from a clear concept and was interpreted by participants in a variety of different ways. It was not necessarily interpreted as a form of holiday travel with low environmental impact, although this was 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 carbon footprint of tourism (for example, using air or car to access cycling holiday destinations). Participants' slow travel included: cycling holidays in France; train trips to Italy, Germany and France; and coach trips to Italy.

2. Holiday travel stories

When people talk about their holiday travel they often talk in a way that improves their own credibility by emphasizing the positive side of their own travel choices and criticizing others. There are many positive ways of talking about slow travel, such as the special engagement with people and places, and there is potential to develop new stories about holiday travel which guide people to more sustainable practices. Conversely there are ways of talking about holiday travel that maintain unsustainable practice, such as the strength of the argument for flying; however, this can be challenged by strong negative perspectives about flying.

3. Travel identity

It is not clear to what extent identity plays a role in travel decisions. Participants were found to engage in distinct travel practices (for example, train holidays) that were largely context specific but, as individuals, they frequently engaged in a diverse range of travel practices in different contexts (for example, a cyclist might fly to the Mediterranean on another holiday).

People therefore switch modes of transport depending on what they are trying to achieve. However, most slow travellers showed a strong commitment to their cycle, coach or train holidays while this commitment was less apparent for air and car travellers.

4. Explanations of travel behaviour in relation to climate change

In relation to climate change, it is evident that people, while concerned, are largely taking no action to amend their holiday travel plans. While participants understood some key climate change issues it was unclear how this knowledge was related to holiday travel. Participants used powerful arguments that excused individual responsibility and delegated it to others (for example, government or tourism industry). Two main themes were apparent: the power to act; and ambivalence. The former included 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 (for example, discussing recycling) was a common mechanism to displace responsibility. Together these provide useful strategies for taking no meaningful action.

5. Opportunities presented by slow travel and barriers for adoption of more carbon efficient travel

The potential of slow travel, while of interest to participants, is currently far from popular. This is because, to a large extent, many destinations and holiday practices currently require engagement with specific travel mechanisms (for example, it can be difficult to book many holiday packages without taking a flight). Pervasive arguments about holiday travel together with existing holiday and travel structures suggest a radical rethink of holiday travel practice is needed. This requires industry engagement. 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 study has provided a foundation for further work on the concept of slow travel. The analysis is ongoing and further details will emerge in journal publications at a later date.

The Author

Dr Janet Dickinson is a Senior Lecturer in Tourism and Leisure Management based in the International Centre for Tourism and Hospitality Research, School of Services Management, Bournemouth University, UK. Her research interests, publications and conference papers are in the areas of sustainable tourism and transport, particularly tourism and climate change. Most recently her work has focused on how holiday travel practices are influenced by society, experiences and expectations of travel in order to analyse the potential for less energy intensive holidays in the context of climate change. This includes developing the slow travel concept.

Contact Us

Further information on the Slow Tourism Travel for a Lower Carbon Future study is available on <http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/icthr/slowtravel.html>

Details of other research conducted with the School of Services Management can be found on www.bournemouth.ac.uk

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