

The future of tourism: interview with Jeremy Sampson on the need for systemic change in tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – As the Journal of Tourism Futures celebrates its 10th Anniversary, Dr Stefan Hartman (head of department at the European Tourism Futures Institute, NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences) interviews Jeremy Sampson (CEO of The Travel Foundation) about his view on the evolution of the tourism industry and the need for systemic change.

Design/methodology/approach – A personal interview held on July, 16, 2024.

Findings – Jeremy Sampson highlights the importance of scenario planning and strategic foresight and its evolution. Sampson elaborates on his personal career journey, the approach of the Travel Foundation and how this informed a strong focus on the ground impact as well as systemic change.

Originality/value – The interview provides unique insights into the motivation of Sampson and The Travel Foundation and their approaches, aiming to be the change makers in the tourism industry. A role that is very much needed, perhaps particularly from a third sector organization such as The Travel Foundation.

Keywords Future of tourism, Journal of Tourism Futures, Destination management, Stewardship, Impact, System change

Paper type Viewpoint

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This paper forms part of a special section “10th Anniversary of the Journal of Tourism Futures”, guest edited by Dr Stefan Hartman, Prof. Albert Postma and Prof. Ian Yeoman.

Stefan Hartman: Could you start by sharing your background and what led you to the Travel Foundation?

Jeremy Sampson: I have been the CEO of The Travel Foundation since September 2019, so I am coming up to my five-year anniversary with the organization. My career has largely been in sustainability, travel, tourism and the non-profit sector. I am particularly passionate about increasing the visibility and credibility of the third sector in travel and tourism through collaboration and meaningful projects.

Interestingly, I never intended to take this role at The Travel Foundation. At one point, I was pretty sure I would not go back into this line of work because I was frustrated by the perceived lack of visibility and meaningful action from the third sector in travel and tourism. Sustainability seemed like a niche issue that was largely ignored by the industry. However, during the recruitment process, I found the team at The Travel Foundation shared the same level of frustration and a desire for impactful change, particularly in systems change.

One of my favorite quotes comes from Ben Lynam, our Head of Communications, who said on my first day, “All we want here is a hill to die on, and if we die on that hill, so be it.” This resonated with me, and we have been focused on finding that “hill” ever since, representing something meaningful where we could have an impact. To achieve this, we had to change how we worked and increase our visibility and credibility within the industry.

Stefan Hartman: *What changes did you implement to achieve this visibility and credibility?*

Jeremy Sampson: We started by focusing on our value proposition. We asked ourselves: What could we stand for? Where could we have a meaningful impact? We identified a lack of independent leadership in the industry. Most organizations are driven by member needs and/or politics. We wanted to provide an independent voice focused on urgent issues in travel and tourism that required such leadership.

We landed on climate change and economic equity as our two key pillars. For a long time, sustainability had become a buzzword, co-opted by everyone and losing its meaning. We decided to focus on the most urgent priorities and risks facing the industry and provide independent leadership on those.

To do so, we made two significant changes. First, we diversified our income and collaborations to establish independence. We moved from a few funding sources to about 75 or 80 new ones. This allowed us to claim independence; we are not a member-based organization. Second, we became more collaborative, recognizing that we could only achieve so much on our own. We partnered with academic institutions, companies and other nonprofits to catalyze more change. We have even started investing in other companies to bring about meaningful change in the industry.

Stefan Hartman: *You mentioned that sustainability has lost its meaning. Could you elaborate on that?*

Jeremy Sampson: Over the years, there has been a lot of work to define sustainability in travel and tourism. Around 2003, during the UN-designated Year of Ecotourism, there was a shift toward an alternative to mass tourism, which was rapidly growing and presenting challenges to many places. Ecotourism was seen as a model for bringing conservation and social benefits, but it was not necessarily scalable. This led to the growth of the sustainability movement.

Organizations such as The Travel Foundation and the International Ecotourism Society were founded around that time, fueled by funding and energy. The early frameworks aimed to help define sustainability and introduce stakeholders to the concept, focusing on the triple bottom line and holistic approaches.

However, these frameworks have not always been enough to help places define their priorities or use sustainability as a lens for day-to-day decision-making in the tourism business, which ultimately revolves around selling trips. The conversation around sustainability was often siloed. What has been missing are two things. First, a clear understanding of impact and a way to measure and balance positive and negative impacts to result in a net positive for destinations. Second, a sense of prioritization and urgency based on risk.

Stefan Hartman: *How has The Travel Foundation addressed these gaps in sustainability and destination management?*

Jeremy Sampson: We realized that destinations were not utilizing these frameworks effectively to address key issues. For example, many places faced issues such as overtourism but lacked the tools to understand their impact and set meaningful priorities. Overtourism is not just about crowds. It is about whether the resources are available to manage the visitor numbers and impacts.

We started working on helping destinations define what value looks like and how to optimize it. Not just by increasing spending or dispersing visitors, but by understanding that issues such as overtourism and overcrowding are symptoms, not root causes. The root issue often lies in the imbalance between available resources and visitor numbers, which is an untenable situation.

To address this, we need better planning tools and frameworks that go beyond being holistic to identifying real pressure points and prioritizing them urgently.

Stefan Hartman: *In light of recent global challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change, how important is adaptability for destinations?*

Jeremy Sampson: Adaptability is critical. COVID-19 clearly demonstrated the importance of being able to adapt to unexpected situations. Those who were able to quickly adapt to the new reality emerged as winners, while those who could not faced significant challenges.

For example, during the pandemic, my local park in Bristol saw a threefold increase in visitors due to lockdowns. The park's budget was planned long before, based on usual visitor numbers and could not accommodate this sudden increase. Similarly, climate change will bring more uncertainties, such as the extreme heat that forced some Greek and Turkish destinations to shut down in August last year. Then the season extended, and businesses were unprepared to handle that level of tourists in October, creating stress on those locations.

We need better tools for planning and anticipating changes, moving beyond "business as usual" scenarios. The mechanisms for adaptation need to be in place; otherwise, there will be too much pressure on destinations, resulting in conflicts and resource issues.

Stefan Hartman: *What role do you see for academic journals such as the Journal of Tourism Futures in shaping the future of tourism?*

Jeremy Sampson: Journals such as the *Journal of Tourism Futures* are vital for raising issues to the surface and encouraging new ways of thinking. However, the application of the knowledge can be limited unless there is greater engagement from practitioners and the private sector. We need to close the loop between theory and practice, involving stakeholders in both understanding the problems and applying solutions.

We need new thinking, new solutions and new capacities, especially since people on the ground are busy dealing with day-to-day challenges. If I were part of the editorial team, I would focus on redefining the business case for sustainability. Currently, it is viewed through a narrow lens, focusing on the demand gap between intention and action. But the real business case is about risk and opportunity, and how significant issues such as climate change, economic equity and workforce development impact the business and reputation of the industry.

Stefan Hartman: *What is needed to drive real change in the tourism industry?*

Jeremy Sampson: We need to stop focusing on debates over definitions such as "stewardship" and start having real conversations backed by real data and evidence to show how we can make progress. We need to talk about problems honestly and address them rather than engage in performative debates that do not lead to action.

Collaboration is also essential. The industry is highly fragmented, with everyone working within their own sphere of influence. We need more collaboration across silos, borders and administrative boundaries to see real results. This is a governance and funding issue. Without resources allocated to meaningful action at scale, we will not make progress.

Artificial intelligence (AI) can be a helpful tool to reimagine how things are done, offering speed and scale that our human brains sometimes cannot achieve. It can help us be more creative in addressing these complex problems.

Stefan Hartman: *Is there anything else you want to share?*

As a final remark, there is a growing recognition and desire for change in the tourism industry. Stakeholders are more willing to come to the table than ever before. However, what is often lacking is the knowledge, tools and enabling environment to move beyond the performative and implement real, impactful solutions. The future of tourism lies in collaboration, innovation and a willingness to rethink traditional models and approaches.

Further reading

Imbsen, C., Hartman, S., Papp, B. and Lynam, B. (2021), *Towards Destination Stewardship*, World Travel & Tourism Council. doi: [10.13140/RG.2.2.27971.53282](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.27971.53282).

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