Academic myths of tourism

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ABSTRACT

Myths play a critical role in the development of any field of study. They act as the central point for coalition, and differentiate disciplines from each other. The absolute truthfulness of some myths, therefore, is less important than their symbolic truth. Other myths, though, can be damaging, promulgating falsehoods and inhibiting the development of a field. This paper examines the roles myths have played in establishing the cult of tourism scholarship. Senior academics were surveyed to identify what they believe to be myths about tourism. Six broad categories of myth emerged: self interest; foundation; reactive stakeholder; convergent; too good not to be true; and myths inherited from other disciplines. Promulgation of these myths has been abetted by methodological inertia.

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Introduction

Tribe (2006) asked whether it is possible to find the truth about tourism. Perhaps a more salient question is whether some tourism academics are even interested in the truth, for a growing quantum of published research seems more intent on creating and/or perpetuating a range of myths that have been repeated so often that their assumed truthfulness has become part of the mantra that has shaped the style and direction of tourism scholarship. Indeed, many tourism myths seem to be so well entrenched that they are presented as polemics, where questioning them opens the individual to personal attack. This paper identifies a range of common academic myths about tourism that were identified by senior academics from around the world. It seeks further to identify their origins,
understand the role they play and explore why they are so common in academia in general and in tourism studies in particular.

**Myth and myth making in academia**

Traditionally, mythology and religion provided the reference points for the human experience and in doing so, defined belongingness to a social group, helped socialize the individual to that group (Bowles, 1989) and provided a sense of identity that distanced new groups from their past associations (Light, 2001, 2007). Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggest that in a commercial setting organizational myths reflect rationalized and impersonal prescriptions to behaviours. Moreover, since they are highly institutionalized and beyond the discretion of any individual participant or organization, their legitimacy can be taken for granted. Much the same situation occurs in academia, where myth making reflects shared ideas and institutional characteristics that legitimate certain fields of study (Hansen & Williams, 1999), distance emerging fields from their core disciplines, and establish norms about how to conduct research and what results can be expected (Lance, 2011).

The idea of an ‘academic myth’ has a generally narrow definition. McGee (1985) states they are demonstrably false beliefs that are widely held, long-standing and never subjected to deep inspection, while Frantz (2006) identifies them as wrong ideas widely held by authority figures. Kompier (2006) is much more succinct, classifying them as believed truths. Heydenryck (1993) asserts myths pervade everything, including academia. Indeed, writers from such diverse disciplines as chemistry (Frantz, 2006) biotechnology (Nightingale & Martin, 2004), accounting and finance Alexander and Archer (2000), organizational behavior (Aquinis, Pierce, Bosco, Dalton, & Dalton, 2011; Kompier, 2006), business management (Davis, Haltiwanger, & Schuh, 1996), archaeology (Cederlund, 2006; Mercer, 2006), political science (Hansen & Williams, 1999; Heydenryck, 1993), sociology and family studies (Cuskelly, 2009), corporate social responsibility (Doane, 2005), medicine (Vicker, 2008) and others have written about the challenges wrought by academic myths in their respective disciplines.

What constitutes a demonstrably false belief, though, is a matter of interpretation. Some myths are simply factually incorrect, but as Alexander and Archer (2000) point out others may not be false per se, provided they are presented within their proper context. However, false beliefs emerge over time when beliefs are placed in different contexts without appreciating the moderating effect context may have, when the factual basis on which the belief originated becomes so diluted that only a kernel of truth remains or when the fact has become so exaggerated that it is presented as a self-evident, universal truth that is beyond intellectual refutation (Gaines, 2001). Heydenryck (1993: 27) reminds us, “the kernel is hardly the whole corn, and if it is substituted for the whole corn, it will mislead any attempt to understand that whole.” Indeed, Barthes (1984) asserts that myths distort facts rather than make them disappear, and in doing so validate arbitrary assumptions about them. Distortion can be so great that the absolute truthfulness of a myth is often far less important than its symbolic or metaphorical value (Alexander & Archer, 2000).

The origins of academic myths, and the factors that lead to demonstrably false beliefs are diverse. Mercer (2006) argues many myths can be traced to the origins of a discipline, where the work by many early scholars remains dominant, even though their ideas have been confronted by contradictory evidence. Indeed, inertia appears to play a powerful role in entrenching certain ideas as believed truths (Kompier, 2006) to the extent that they become regarded as received doctrines that are taught in undergraduate and postgraduate classes, enforced by gatekeepers, and passed between generations (Lance, 2011). Entrenchment of myths is abetted by the peer review process and doctoral student training (Lance, 2011; Mazanec, 2009; Vandernberg, 2006) where, for example, peer review reinforces certain methodological approaches as the only acceptable way to tackle problems and where doctoral students are often taught there is only one acceptable approach to tackle a problem. The end result is the elimination of originality (Mazanec, 2009).

“Results that are too good not to be true” have also been identified as another source of myths (Davis et al., 1996; Talaulikar & Manyonda, 2011). Flawed methods used to produce the original findings are perpetuated, resulting in further evidence of their truthfulness, or alternately, research that challenges the findings is dismissed. The tendency to believe results that are too good to be true is heightened when the researcher is an advocate of the phenomenon under investigation, resulting in
the failure to engage in critical thinking (Gabennesch, 2006; Lett, 1990). Bad research perpetuates these types of myths. Kompier (2006) accuses many researchers of simply being lazy by not critically reading core studies to verify their methodological accuracy. Indeed, Simkin and Roychowdhury (2003) conclude about 80% of authors who cite highly regarded works have never read the original document, while both Kompier (2006) and Todd, Yeo, Li, and Ladle (2007) found a high level of inaccurate interpretation and the selective omission of facts that do not support the author’s thesis, even among those who have ostensibly read the works. One of the anonymous referees also cautioned about cherry picking research to refute widely held claims.

The risk of myth making is accentuated in studies that are conducted under the assumption that there is something out there and then set out to find it (Ernst, 2011; Hill, 2011). This type of research can be described as “self-fulfilling prophecy research” for the intent is to prove something, rather than explore ideas. Studies of this type have been identified in archeology (Mercer, 2006) and research into families of children with disabilities (Cuskelly, 2009) where cultural norms and perceptions incline researchers to ask questions in a particular way to achieve a ‘desired’ result. Pre-determined beliefs will further influence how information is interpreted, with Radford (2010) suggesting very ordinary events can be mistaken for extraordinary ones.

Sheaffer (2008) adds the fallacy of misplaced rationalism, where a great deal of time and effort is devoted to pursuing elaborate, rational explanations for phenomena, without first demonstrating their existence. Over 20 years ago, Lett (1990) reminded us of the principle of falsifiability: for any claim to be true, it must also be falsifiable. That way, if the claim is false, the evidence will prove it false, and if the claim is true, the evidence will not disprove it. Yet, many myths are created because this principle is violated. Researchers ‘prove’ their ideas by selective or misleading data analysis (Davis et al., 1996) and by inferring causality when no such causal relation exists (Sherman, 2009). This observation identifies the epistemological implications that arise through the use of inappropriate methods. Moreover, the style of language used by researchers may also have a role in myth making. The use of positivist language to describe results connotes a finding based on evidence whereas normative language implies how things ought to be and their value in terms of good or bad.

Torcello (2012: 37) reminds us that good scientific research, by necessity, involves skeptical rigor, noting science “is a fundamentally skeptical endeavor involving the testing of hypotheses, coupled with efforts to protect test results from confounding variables, including the researcher’s own biases. . . . science advances through efforts to disprove hypotheses, even when hope has held for their confirmation.” All possible intervening or moderating factors must be eliminated before the results can be attributed to the phenomenon being studied. He indicates that part of the problem may lie in poor basic training of researchers. One of the anonymous referees cautioned that “it may not be wise to speak of a ‘myth’ if there is controversial empirical evidence partially supporting and partially disproving a contention.” This referee also went onto add that some myths may have evolved out of the immature status of research and theory-building on behalf of the researcher.

Finally, the role of other stakeholders cannot be ignored (Kompier, 2006) for they play a key role in myth making directly by funding studies that support their desired myths (Munteanu, Zingg, & Azzi, 2004) or indirectly by spreading myths throughout their stakeholder networks. Doane (2005), for example, discusses how the myth of corporate social responsibility is repeated by industry, even though empirical evidence of businesses behaving in a more socially responsible manner is still limited. Likewise, Short and Toffler (2010) discuss industry’s promulgation of the myth of self-regulation, when in reality it works only when accompanied by a strong regulatory framework.

Identification of tourism myths—method

A three stage research framework was adopted, commencing with a directed literature search investigating academic myths, followed by a survey of a purposeful sample of leading tourism academics, and concluding with a further review of the tourism literature to identify the origin of the myths identified by respondents. The sample frame followed the same sampling principles adopted by Tribe (2010). Prospective participants were identified from the membership list of the International Academy for the Study of Tourism (IAST), the Council for Australian Tourism and Hospitality Education
CAUTHE and the authors’ own professional networks. The target sample of 78 respondents included 19 women and 59 men from North America, Australia, Europe and Asia representing such fields as sociology, geography, political studies, marketing, business studies, anthropology, information technology, human resource management, planning, hospitality management, tourism, recreation and leisure studies, psychology, etc. In addition, opinions from colleagues and post graduate students from two universities were solicited.

Two e-mail calls for contributions were made between April and August 2012. Potential respondents were asked to identify and explain myths that they felt existed in tourism. In total, 43 individuals responded, including 35 from the original set of 78 academics, six doctoral students and two colleagues from one author’s university. A total of 133 suggestions were submitted, with the number of submissions per respondent ranging from one to eight items. The data set was cleaned to merge similar items into a single category, identify methodological issues that contribute to the perpetuation of these myths and to eliminate items that did not relate specifically to tourism.

Content analysis was conducted by the two authors independently to identify the main and secondary thematic domains that encapsulated each myth. The dominant or originating thematic domain was identified in cases where myths fit into multiple domains. In such cases, the proximate or original causal source myth was identified. An iterative process was adopted, beginning first with the grouping of myths by common subject area and then classifying them in a progressively more focused manner. Once completed, the authors met and compared their findings before arriving at the final typology discussed below.

The authors recognize fully certain limitations associated with the study. To begin, the set of myths discussed below is not exhaustive. Increasing the sample size and broadening the population to include non-English speaking scholars would likely have identified more myths. It is also recognized that some level of subjectivity is inevitable in this type of study. More importantly, the items reported below were identified by participants in the study and do not necessarily reflect the views of the authors. Issues needed to satisfy three criteria for inclusion in this paper. First, the authors filtered identifiable myths from more generalized commentaries and editorial comments. Second, some evidence (in whole or in part) was needed supporting the possible falsifiability of the myth. This evidence was supplied by either by the respondent him or herself, or by literature found elsewhere. Third, McGee’s (1985) criteria of being widely held, long-standing and never (or rarely) subjected to deep inspection was used as the final arbiter. Whether the issues presented in this paper are truly academic myths may be open to debate. However, the aim of the paper is to report on the views of an informed audience, not argue the case for or against specific issues identified. That task is best left to the future and will no doubt create an opportunity for vigorous debate in the literature.

A typology of tourism myths

Six types of myths were identified by respondents. They are: self interest myths; negative foundation myths; reactive positive stakeholder generated myths; convergent myths; myths that are too good not to be true; and myths inherited from other disciplines and applied to tourism. Each set is described below. An additional section identifying methodological issues that lead to or perpetuate myths is also included.

Type 1—Self interest myths

Self interest myths serve the purpose of helping distance tourism studies from its many contributing disciplines, and at the same time affirm its legitimacy as a field of study. Most of these myths are fairly innocuous, where their absolute truthfulness is less relevant than their symbolic truth. Examples of self interest myths identified by participants include the assertions that ‘tourism is the world’s largest industry’, ‘tourism is an industry’, and that ‘tourism is a discipline’.

The idea that tourism is the world’s largest industry can be traced to the earliest origins of tourism scholarship. Jafari (1974: 224) writing in the first volume of Annals of Tourism Research stated “international tourism represents the largest single trade item in the world.” Other authors in early editions
of English language journals repeated this mantra. Lew (2012), has challenged this myth asserting “tourism actually ranks about 6th in international trade based on World Trade Organization figures.” Commenting on this claim one participant suggested:

“I and others in the field don’t believe that it is [the world’s largest industry] in terms of dollars generated or employment created. Agriculture, for instance, would be much larger by far both in terms of the formal agricultural economy and informal, just as tourism has formal and informal economic elements.”

The idea that tourism is an industry can be also traced to the first edition of the International Journal of Tourism Management where (Burkart, 1980: 2), wrote “this diversity of approaches [to the examination of tourism] is now stabilizing with one viewpoint gaining favor—namely that tourism is a whole, a single industry that nevertheless comprises a number of interdependent suppliers and, as such, is a fit domain of study.” Many respondents challenged this assertion. One noted “[the belief that tourism is an industry is] probably the biggest myth of all. Numerous papers have addressed this but no one seems to read them,” while a second added “textbook after textbook; paper after paper says that tourism is an industry. It is no wonder that students who study tourism and later study strategic management find it impossible to understand Porter’s five forces model if they use it for “the tourism industry.” A third participant identified two flaws behind this myth, noting “first, tourism is not an industry in the usual sense of an industry being a collection of businesses producing essentially the same product with essentially the same technology and second, data to support this claim are difficult to obtain.”

Whether tourism is a field of study or a discipline is a contentious issue that has generated significant debate in TRINET and elsewhere. Tribe (1997) wrote a compelling piece challenging the discipline argument, by arguing tourism consists of two distinct fields of study, an interdisciplinary business-related field and an equally important non-business related field. Coles, Hall, and Duval (2006: 313)suggest tourism should be viewed from a post-disciplinary, or ‘beyond-disciplinary’ perspective, that encourages more flexible modes of knowledge production and consumption that can address the complexity of tourism studies. Many participants also raised this issue, with all asserting tourism is not a discipline.

Respondents who challenged these myths seem to have overlooked the symbolic importance of such claims, for the promulgation of these beliefs helps justify tourism as a legitimate field of research. Importantly, they help create a shared sense of belonging among academics who for many years struggled to have their research regarded as credible (Dann, Nash, & Pearce, 1988; Tribe, 1997). We often forget that in the early years tourism research was often seen as a frivolous and inconsequential issue (Nash, 1979). Moreover, many early academics worked in isolation on the fringes of their home disciplines.

Type 2—Negative foundation myths

Tourism’s foundation myths generated a large number of comments from participants. Whereas foundation myths of other disciplines tend to be heroic and generally positive, many, if not most of the issues classified as foundation tourism academic myths have a strong negative context. The myth that ‘tourism destroys tourism’ is perhaps the most enduring of all. Its origins can be traced to Plog (1974: 58) who wrote “we can visualize a destination moving across the [lifecycle] spectrum, however gradually or slowly, but far too often inexorably towards the potential of its own demise. Destinations carry with them the potential seeds of their own destruction.” The myth became entrenched by the inaccurate interpretation of Butler’s (1980) destination lifecycle model, where decline was identified as one of five possible outcomes. Interestingly, few people discuss the other potential post-maturity phases which include ongoing stability, recovery or rejuvenation.

Other examples of foundation myths identified by respondents include the belief that tourism invariably leads to conflict, resident antipathy, a host of adverse social, cultural and environmental impacts, commodification of local culture, the demonstration effect, destruction of local cultures, neocolonialism, the perpetuation of power imbalances and the destruction of natural areas. The origins of many of the myths associated with social impacts can be traced to Doxey’s (1975) oft cited Irridex,
while environmental impacts of tourism began with Budowski's (1976: 27) posited relationship between tourism and the environment where he wrote “unfortunately, all too often, the relationship between tourism and conservation is usually one of coexistence moving towards conflict.”

It would appear that much of the early research published in *Annals of Tourism Research* had a profound impact in creating and mainstreaming many negative foundation myths. A review of 32 papers published between 1975 and 1979 documenting social and/or environmental impacts, reveals that 19 highlighted adverse impacts, seven discussed both benefits and costs, three expressed no overt opinion, and only three commented on the positive effect of tourism on the socio-cultural environment. Harriman (1974) introduced the idea of tourism as a form of neo-colonialism. Wenkman (1975) documented the adverse environmental impacts of tourism on Hawaii. UNESCO (1976) published a literature review of the adverse social consequences of tourism. Rodenburg (1980) condemned large scale tourism in Bali and argued that small, community based tourism is preferred. Farrell (1979) documented adverse host-guest interactions. Jafari (1974) wrote a lengthy article documenting explicitly focusing on the costs, and not benefits of tourism. Indeed, one is left with the impression that many of the early scholars who shaped the field of study had a deep dislike of tourism, and used the *Annals of Tourism Research* as a forum to voice their opinions, some of which take an almost ideological view that tourism is bad. Concern about the tone of much of this work was voiced by Mings (1978) who called for an expansion of impact research to develop a more complete knowledge to balance excessive negativism about the social impacts of tourism.

It is also worth noting that many early tourism scholars reported the creation of these negative foundation myths was a response from positions held by pro-tourism industry and government stakeholders that were so prevalent in the 1970s. This was an era when many developing economies saw tourism as a fast-track to rapid socio-economic development and failed to appreciate that unfettered tourism could exert a variety of costs. The publications of studies highlighting tourism’s adverse impacts reflected an alternative views that they felt needed to be considered.

**Type 3—Reactive positive stakeholder myths**

A third set of myths indentified by participants can best be described as positive, reactive myths to counter the above set of negative myths, the origin of which can be ascribed to public and private sector stakeholders, led by the World Tourism Organization. These myths related to assertions of the beneficial social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism, with no reference of possible costs and to the belief that tourism could be planned and managed. The *Social and Cultural Impact of Tourist Movements* (WTO, 1981) documented how tourism can arrest rural depopulation, revitalize local culture, reduce poverty, increase the rate of positive social change, be beneficial to the environment and build community pride, using a series of mostly anecdotal cases. The *Study on Tourism’s Role in Protecting the Environment* (WTO, 1983) argued that most if not all of tourism’s adverse impacts can be addressed through proper planning. In particular, the report states “it should be again stressed, in reply to the claims that tourism seriously damages the environment, that it is not tourism itself which contains the virus which attacks the environment, but rather the methods adopted to develop tourism in the absence of proper responsibilities by public authorities (WTO, 1983: 12).” This argument is similar to the American pro-gun lobby polemic that guns do not kill people, people kill people!

**Type 4—Convergent ideological myths**

A fourth type of myth can be attributed to the convergence of negative foundation and positive reactive stakeholder myths to create new myths about preferred types of tourism, tourists and activities. Most of these myths are heavily value-laden, infused with the belief that mass tourism is bad, small is preferred and that certain types of tourism and tourists were better than others. They also infer that a new type of ethically superior tourist will soon supplant the existing mass market. One participant identified and then challenged the myth that alternative tourism (and its various derivatives) is inherently better by explaining “off the-beaten-track tourists are often responsible for “opening up” places, putting them on the map and putting them on the path towards development.” Another stated that the mass market and alternative markets are not substitutable, and moreover, mass tourism may
be easier to manage than alternative forms. Others identified similar myths about “travelers” being more authentic than “tourists”, or that nature-loving tourists are friendlier to the environment, or more environmentally conscious than others, even though another participant mentioned “there is very little evidence of this except for limited data from a few countries, Germany, Scandinavia”.

Many myths about ecotourism and a range of associated activities, including the belief that green tourism sells, that eco-operators are more ethical in their behaviours that others, that tourists are willing to pay a premium for green products, and ultimately, that nature-based tourism is good for the environment were identified and challenged by respondents. The emergence of ecotourism has created common ground for both industry and academia to create and embed a whole new set of myths as received truths. Ecotourism was portrayed as a new type of tourism for a new type of socially conscious consumer (Hawkins & Lamoureux, 2001; Wight, 2001).

Respondents described these types of myths as being especially worrisome for they are supported by wishful thinking, and little fact. Some eco-operators may have a heightened sense of ethical conduct (Fennel & Malloy, 1999), but their actual behaviours are no better, and often worse that others (Warnken, Bradley, & Guilding, 2005). Moreover, they are now so deeply entrenched in the ideological belief that certain forms of tourism are beneficial, that in many ways, they have become new foundation myths for the second generation of tourism academics whose training was based in dedicated tourism programmes.

A less intrusive form of convergent ideological myth relates to the belief that tourism is a significant generator of jobs. This myth has been promulgated by industry stakeholders and some academics, but, interestingly, not by tourism economists. One economist commenting on the myth that an expanding tourism industry creates jobs noted that “there have been many publications supporting this hypothesis but most of these studies were carried out based on wrong theoretical framework or incorrect specification of the growth model”, while another commented “economic modeling shows that tourism expansion may make the poor relatively poorer (e.g. if they work in agriculture which can contract as tourism expands).” The myth that tourism creates low skilled, low value jobs that exploit workers was also challenged by one participant who suggests researchers need to examine the total employment package (compensation and benefits including meals), rather than simply hourly wages might produce different results.

**Type 5—Too good not to be true**

A number of myths were identified about the size of special interest tourism markets and the perceived differences between special interest and other tourists that are typical examples of too good not to be true myths. The oft quoted figure that 60% of all international tourists are nature-based tourists and 40% are wildlife-related tourists (IES, 2000) have gained such widespread acceptance that Litvin (1996) noted many people felt they would soon displace the traditional tourist as the new mainstream market. Similarly outrageous figures have been promulgated for most other forms of special interest tourism (McKercher & Chan, 2005).

It does not matter that UNWTO research has shown them to be out by a factor of 20 to 30 times (UNWTO, 2002). Nor does it matter that method used to generate these numbers was highly flawed (McKercher & Chan, 2005). Indeed, these types of myths are prime examples of the types of concerns raised by Sherman (2009) discussed earlier, for McKercher and Chan (2005) illustrate causality is inferred between observed behaviour and trip purpose, when causality does not necessarily exist, and further effect-effect relationships are presented as causal relationships. Moreover, these types of studies also violate Torcello’s (2012) principle by failing to consider the moderating effect of other variables on the phenomenon being studied.

Issues related to sustainability, including the belief that tourism is a clean sector, can protect the environment and that it is possible to achieve triple bottom line sustainability also came in for much criticism. These myths emerged in the aftermath of the publication of ‘Our Common Future’ or the so called Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) which placed sustainability firmly on the global economic and environmental agenda. Public sector tourism stakeholders, in particular, were among the first to endorse these principles (ESDWG, 1991). Challenges associated with triple bottom line of sustainability relate primarily to the ability to operationalize it. One respondent observed.
“sustainability can be a challenging concept to publicly oppose, but it is very difficult to operation-
ally measure and thus to achieve. Except for those circumstances in which a site or a destination
suffers a collapse of some sort, it is difficult to affirm whether a particular development is sustain-
able or not. Further, there is disagreement over how widely one should be conceptualizing
‘sustainable’.”

A development specialist added further “much is claimed for the ‘developmental effects’ of tour-
ism. But the very amorphous nature of tourism makes measurement very problematic. . . . economic
and financial impacts are rapid whereas the social, cultural and environmental changes are longer-
term and very difficult to measure.” He went on to add this observation about the triple bottom line:

“anyone who works in the field knows that the concept is impractical. First, you may be able to
measure economic impacts to an imperfect degree but, second how do you measure/evaluate envi-
ronmental changes? The same reasoning would apply to socio-cultural changes… to imply that
this balance is based on some credible form of appraisal is nonsense. Where are the examples?”

Other examples of myths that fall into the too good not to be true category include the belief that a
relationship exists between tourism and peace and that the mass market has fractured into a group of
large, fast growing specialist interest markets. D’Amore (1998) has championed the former myth but
both Litvin (1998) and Kim and Prideaux (2003) demonstrate that the relationship between tourism
and peace is more likely to be casual, than causal. This belief was also challenged by a respondent who
wrote that the claim “is still propagated in industry-related contexts while sociological research now
should provide plenty of studies demonstrating the strengthening of prejudice and national stereo-
types.” The popularization of the myth about the fracturing of the mass market can be traced to the
consultant Poon (1988, 1994) who wrote about the demise of ‘old tourism’ and the emergence of
‘new tourism.’ They generated some of the most caustic comments from study respondents:

“a winner for Poon and highly popular with students and with destination promoters who can sell
their destination to a “new” market by claiming to meet the “demands” of “new” tourists.”

“the world is being flooded by all these wonderful sensitive, eco-warrior culturally aware benevo-
lent tourists these days - if only!”

Propagation of these types of myths is potentially problematic for tourism studies for much the
same reasons as the type of convergent ideological myths identified previously. Few people seem will-
ing to challenge them once they have entered the mainstream of intellectual thought. Moreover, so
much research has been published supporting them that it will be difficult to find opposing view-
points during literature reviews, even if they are challenged.

Type 6—Inherited myths

Tourism scholarship has been informed by many disciplines. While it has led to a rich diversity of
research, it has also led to the situation where factually accurate assumptions about specific aspects of
consumer behaviour drawn from non-tourism contexts, have been applied to tourism, without appreci-
ciating its unique nature. In particular, respondents identified a number of myths about the relation-
ship between loyalty, satisfaction, intent to return and actual repeat visitation. Recent research, for
example, shows no statistically significant relationship between intention to return and actual repeat
visitation rates (McKercher & Tse, 2012), while other studies identified the confounding fact that tour-
ists seem to be inherently disloyal as a factor influencing much loyalty research (Bowen & Shoemaker,
1998). One respondent noted “intention to return can be influenced by satisfaction, but it is even more
influenced by other variables such as the desire for novelty, development of alternatives by compet-
itors, extraordinary events such as weather that may have nothing to do with the satisfaction of the
past visit experience.”

Leisure studies has contributed myths associated with non-travel. It is assumed that everyone
wants to have leisure, but that a variety of intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural barriers inhibit
participation (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Lack of interest is relegated to part of the larger basket of
intrapersonal constraints that may affect participation. However, one participant suggested lack of
interest may be an overarching reason for non-participation in tourism that has nothing to do with traditional leisure theory. She stated that some people may simply not have the travel bug, or it may not be a big enough priority to motivate travel.

Land use management theory contributes to myths about tourism carrying capacity and willingness to pay. One respondent reminded us that “carrying capacity was originally developed as a range management tool to assess the number of head of livestock (cows, sheep) that could be sustainably raised on a given parcel of land. In this context, carrying capacity is fundamentally a function of observable measures such as precipitation, temperature, and vegetation/feed.” Within a tourism context, though, it is fundamentally a social construct that depends on management objectives, site development and site hardening, the type of tourist desired and many other variables too numerous to measure. As such, it is impossible to determine a single measure of the “capacity” of a site. Likewise, another respondent challenged assumptions about willingness to pay by arguing it is difficult to prove the premium value of green products, making willingness to pay great in theory, until you actually ask people to add a premium for a green product.

Perhaps, though, the most challenging inherited myth identified by participants is the belief that tourism lacks theory. The myth was exacerbated historically by the failure to include all but two journals in various citation indices, supporting opinions that it lacked academic rigor. The participants who identified this myth cited a large and growing body of tourism theory, and also called for more academics to question imported models and theories that fail to explain the tourism phenomenon well. One participant, in particular, observed, “rather than writing that tourism lacks theory, one could even more meaningfully argue that tourism has too many different “theories” in the sense of lacking a consensus on what the word means.”

Methods as a contributing factor

Participants identified a number of method-related factors that facilitate myth generation, including methodological inertia, sloppy or misguided research, and the desire to ‘prove’ ideologically based assumptions. In particular, the adoption of a method that produces ‘good’ results was identified as being especially problematic, for it tends to become entrenched as the norm to examine specific phenomena, without its validity being challenged. One participant had his graduate students review over 20 studies on segmentation and commented “they all have similar conclusions and suggestions for destination marketers and promoters,” adding credence to Mazanec’s (2009) thesis that the use of such methods results in derivative studies which stall development of the field.

This same individual identified a number of other problematic methods, including the tendency to use one dependent variable when outcomes are usually shaped by a number of dependent variables, the failure to establish benchmarks or indicators to compare results to see if they are meaningful, and the fact that most published studies draw generalizations based on data collected at one point in time. Another respondent added we assume “visitors travel with a single dominant motivation, when in reality a very large proportion have multiple motives.” A third respondent made the following comment on the use of Likert scales:

“Likert scales . . . are designed to measure attitudes on a bipolar scale—running from some measure of agreement to a statement to some measure of disagreement. First, a monotonic scale, such as an “importance scale” running from “not at all important” to “very important” is not a bipolar scale and is not a Likert scale. Second, mid-points on Likert scales are often problematic. Likert himself believed one should not have a “neutral” attitude. One might not have an attitude, but if one does, it must be either positive or negative to some degree.”

In addition, one of the authors has noted that much tourism research tends to be both derivative and incestuous. Studies tend to replicate the same method, which, not surprisingly produces similar results. Researchers point out that the method has been used elsewhere as justification for its presumed validity, without engaging in critical thinking to determine if, indeed, it is valid. It has also been observed that early papers on ‘new’ topics refer widely to the broader non-tourism literature to inform their study. But, as the volume of tourism research increases, researchers tend to rely more and more on tourism-related publications and either do not read outside the field of study, or if they cite
materials, often appear not to have read the original source article, and instead, summarize ‘sound bites’ that have been cited elsewhere. The result is that only a kernel of truth remains from the original studies that may have informed research. As an example, McKercher and Tse (2012) note than many studies examining intention to return cited a 1988 study that conducted a meta analysis as justification of the relationship between intention and actual repeat visitation. However, the authors wonder if people actually read this study, for none recognized that the strength of the relationship between intention and actual use is influenced by nine factors, many of which apply to tourism.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper was envisioned initially as a commentary on the weak state of tourism research. However, as the study evolved the authors developed a greater appreciation of the diverse role that myths play in the establishment, legitimization and growth of a field of study. The literature on myth making in academia identified a range of causal agents that help create, disseminate and entrench myths as part of the ethos that underpins most disciplines or fields of study. A similar situation was found here, with Table 1 summarizing the six broad categories of myth found in tourism academia. Examples of each type are also shown. The issues identified in this table are incredibly rich, with each being worthy of a paper in its own right. Unfortunately, space limitations restricted the authors to the identification of the myth, rather than a deep exploration of each.

Is the creation and promulgation of myths that problematic for tourism studies? The answer, like so many other facets of tourism, is a definitive “it depends.” The types of self interest myth identified

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<tr>
<th>Type of Myth</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self Interest</td>
<td>• Tourism is the world's largest industry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism is an industry</td>
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<td>• Tourism is a discipline</td>
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<td>Negative Foundation</td>
<td>• Tourism destroys tourism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism perpetuates colonialism/tourism is neo-colonialism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism generates some positive economic benefits, but they are offset</td>
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<td></td>
<td>by massive social, cultural and environmental impacts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism leads to conflict</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism commodifies culture</td>
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<td>Reactive Positive</td>
<td>• Tourism is a path to economic independence</td>
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<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>• Tourism revitalizes culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism protects the environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism provides a range of positive social benefits</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• People damage the environment, not tourism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Convergent</td>
<td>• Size, importance and differences of ecotourism/ecotourists and other</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>forms of alternative tourism/tourists</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Employment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Small is preferable</td>
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<td>Too Good Not To Be True</td>
<td>• A traveler is better than a tourist</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Special interest tourism as the new mainstream</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism and peace</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Economic and employment benefits of tourism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourist seek authentic experiences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Ecotourism and ecotourism operators are more ethical than others</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tourism is a clean sector</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Sustainability and the triple bottom line can be operationalized</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Quality of tourism jobs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Multiplier effect of tourism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inherited</td>
<td>• Relationship between satisfaction, loyalty, intent to return and actual</td>
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<td></td>
<td>repeat visitation rates</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Carrying capacity works in tourism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Willingness to pay</td>
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<td>• Tourism lacks theory</td>
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are rather innocuous, while many of the negative foundation and reactive positive stakeholder myths can be regarded in a generally positive manner for they have created the unusual situation where two sets of parallel, but opposing myths exist. For every negative myth, a positive counter myth exists, and vice versa: tourism destroys the environment/tourism protects the environment; tourism commodifies and debases local culture/tourism revitalizes local culture, etc. These dualities provide a fertile research agenda that has stimulated the multi-disciplinary epistemological development of the field of study.

However, the other classes of myth are more dangerous for they promote ideological beliefs that have little basis in fact, entrench flawed methodologies that produce ‘good’ but ultimately wrong findings and, importantly promote causal relationships when causality may not exist. Many have become elevated to the stature of received doctrines. The promulgation of some of these myths has also had a detrimental effect on industry, with many myths about special interest tourism resulting in the expensive pursuit of phantom markets. Worryingly, pursuit of them has focused research on peripheral tourism activities, while creating an atmosphere that actively discourages research into mass market tourism. As one of the reviewers of this manuscript observed “there are plenty of professors of sustainable tourism. I am not aware of any professors of mass tourism. [Does] this show how deeply the myth has penetrated?” The end result is a constriction of research creativity. Tribe (2006: 360) raised this issue when he observed researchers view themselves as lions in the jungle, but then asked if indeed, they may be lions in a circus, caged by role and constrained by structure.

Additionally, the study has led to a deeper understanding of the origins of many myths that can be related to the evolution of tourism studies. Tourism is still a maturing field. English language academic interest in tourism studies is, arguably, only three generations old. The first generation was typified by scholars who were educated in so called foundation core disciplines and began to study tourism as a side interest to explore their home discipline. Jafari and Ritchie’s (1981) famous wheel typifies their scholarly approach, whereby a number of disciplines contributed specific research interests that culminated in the birth of tourism studies. First generation scholars were the true pioneers in the field, and in many ways, set a research agenda that is still relevant today.

The second generation began in the late 1980s with the rapid expansion of stand-alone tourism degrees and/or departments, with for example, the number of providers in Australia, growing from three in 1987 to 16 by 1990 (Craig-Smith, Davidson, & French, 1995). Universities needing to staff these programmes sought individuals with extensive industry experience and masters qualifications, simply because the pool of qualified doctoral graduates did not exist. These practitioners-turned-academics had a strong intuitive knowledge of the practice of tourism, but usually entered academia lacking the same epistemological or methodological skill set of first generation academics. Many became active researchers, who are responsible for the healthy state of tourism research today. The third generation started in the late 1990s, when a large number of well-established tourism and hospitality programmes began to offer dedicated doctoral programmes.

Each generation has played a role in tourism myth making. The first two generations, in particular, were largely responsible for the formulation and perpetuation of most myths, while the gauntlet has been thrown metaphorically to the third generation to either continue the practice of myth making or to challenge and correct the most damaging myths. The first generation created foundation myths, and were also responsible for importing inherited myths from their home disciplines. The second generation has played three critical roles. Some have continued to perpetuate negative foundation myths. Others bought into reactive stakeholder myths and were, therefore, responsible for creating convergent and too good not to be true myths. Moreover, because most of them earned their doctorates in legacy disciplines, also tended to perpetuate inherited myths. All three are responsible for perpetuating self interest myths, for obvious reasons.

The challenge now falls to the third generation of tourism scholars. If trained well, these scholars have the potential to synthesize ideas from many perspectives to develop an epistemological base for tourism studies, challenge many of the existing myths and indeed, lead the development of tourism-specific theory. Their strength lies, potentially, in the broad disciplinary background that tourism studies has the potential to encourage. On the other hand, some academics have expressed concern that graduates from tourism programmes lack the strong legacy discipline background of their
predecessors and are at risk of developing a weak understanding of epistemology of tourism, which could result in the perpetuation of many of the myths and mistakes made by their predecessors.

Myth making may have a legitimate role to play in academia, providing it serves the beneficial purpose of supporting the raison d’être for a field of study and for providing a central rallying point for researchers. However, other types of myths need to be challenged, especially if they reflect wishful thinking that cannot be supported by rigorous evaluation. This paper sought to generate debate about many of the beliefs that have created the cult of tourism scholarship. Not all readers will agree with the findings and some will dispute the existence of some of the beliefs identified here. However, Heydenryck’s (1993: 27) call to “engage a myth, find its history and liberate a new definition for the ‘natural’ concept it impoverishes” reflects the overarching purpose of this paper. Debate of this nature is needed, healthy and may help advance tourism studies.

References


Doxey, G. V. (1975). A causation theory of visitor-resident irritants: Methodology and research inferences. In Travel and tourism research associations sixth annual conference proceedings (pp. 195–198), San Diego, September.


