

Beyond bouncing back: A framework for tourism resilience building in the Pacific

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Abstract

This paper argues that although Covid-19 has had problematic consequences, it must spur a self-determined and collective approach to resilience - beyond merely bouncing back to the way things were. It touches on how tourism development and its disruption by Covid-19 can inspire action that enables resilience building to withstand future shocks. The Tourism Resilience Framework is proposed, as offering a Pacific-centred approach that can guide a cohesive multi-stakeholder model grounded in action research. More importantly, this paper accords power and agency to local stakeholders, supporting the notion that resilience building must be part of a self-determined and inclusive process if tourism is to be reimaged sustainably.

Keywords: resilience, sustainable development, Pacific tourism, regenerative tourism, climate change

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has led to the near collapse of the international tourism industry, with a predicted USD\$950 million decline in the Pacific regional economy (Gounder, 2020; Shen, 2020). While some might see this as a devastating blow, this paper argues that the pandemic has provided an opportunity for building more sustainable and resilient tourism futures. Rather than returning to business as usual as soon as possible (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Nepal, 2020), the pandemic can be a trigger for the Pacific tourism industry to align with, and support the United Nations' World Tourism Organization's One Planet vision to pursue responsible, sustainable, long-term recovery, post-pandemic (UNWTO, 2020). Generating the necessary evidence to support decision-making towards resilience and sustainability in tourism is now more pressing than ever. To reduce vulnerabilities (Dogru et al., 2019; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008), increase resilience (Filimonau and De Coteau, 2020), and overcome potential future challenges, whether associated with pandemics, climate change, political strife or natural disasters, the resumption and future of tourism must be planned appropriately (Duxbury et al., 2021). So, while the pandemic lays bare the weaknesses of the current tourism system, it also provides motivation (Edwards, 2020), especially for Big Ocean States of the Pacific, to reflect on past practices, and seek ways of building forward stronger (Mosedale, 2012).

Despite this, much of the current literature suggests deep-seated expectations of bouncing back to a previous state of normalcy after a shock is experienced, especially in investment intensive sectors such as tourism (Coetzee et al., 2016; Cretney, 2014). This view is prominent in global predictions and recent trends of the return of tourism post-pandemic (Zaman et al., 2021), and is underpinned by the assumption that economic recovery requires the urgent recommencement of tourism, with resilience understood as a mere return to the way things were (Pendall et al., 2010). Little consideration has thus been given to the opportunity to reset and reorganise the tourism system to withstand a diverse range of shocks (Brouder et al., 2020; Nalau et al., 2018). In reality, Pacific peoples have made complex adjustments in their livelihoods, and have maintained essential food production and social safety nets in response to previous crises (Leweniqila and Vunibola, 2021). Research has also shown that Pacific people and businesses that have lost tourism income due to the pandemic have used a variety of adaptive measures, which have sustained their well-being in many complex ways (Scheyvens et al., 2021). These internal adaptive shifts and lessons from Pacific people's experiences from the pandemic can inform planning and determine outcomes that serve the interests of Pacific peoples.

This paper, therefore, seeks to challenge long-held neo-colonial narratives and predominantly capitalist views (Ratuva, 2019) that support tourism's rapid return to its pre-pandemic form (Nepal, 2020). It will outline the motivation for research in this area before the methodology and critical literature is discussed. The paper will suggest possible ways forward for post-pandemic recovery that can build resilience in the face of multiple shocks that communities are likely to face in the future. By recognising the agency and power of Pacific tourism stakeholder cooperation (Filimonau and De Coteau, 2020; Lew, 2014), the discussion raises the potential to identify tourism resilience in the Pacific as a socially and ecologically self-determined system (Brouder et al., 2020; Cochrane, 2010). To this end, the paper will ultimately propose the Tourism Resilience Model as a tool for framing and guiding action for more resilient futures for the Pacific.

Tourism and resilience in the Pacific: Setting the research agenda

Many Pacific Island countries were highly reliant on tourism revenue pre-COVID-19 (Connell, 2021). Therefore, re-establishing tourism, but in more equitable and sustainable ways, is essential for economic survival. This is especially so for countries like Fiji and Vanuatu, which earned 45% of GDP pre-pandemic from tourism (Scheyvens and Movono, 2020, Cheer et al., 2018). Our research, as part of a Royal Society Te Aparangi-funded project, focuses on resilience in relation to tourism-dependent countries of Samoa and the Cook Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji. These countries have some shared geographical, cultural and tourism attributes, yet show different economic and social trajectories (Connell, 2021). Importantly, Pacific Island countries share similar experiences of shocks such as severe tropical cyclones, political uncertainty, and the current pandemic-based tourism impacts (Gounder, 2020). Pacific societies also have robust cultural and traditional knowledge systems that support resilience during the pandemic, providing valuable lessons for researchers.

Pacific tourism resilience research to date indicates that considerable resilience and adaptivity exists within Pacific communities, extending, in some instances into public policy responses (Movono & Scheyvens, 2022; Leweniqila & Vunibola, 2021; Cheer et al. 2018; Movono & Hughes, 2020; Movono, 2017). These adaptive features of Pacific systems demonstrate strength and reflexivity during the current crisis, and have immense potential to shed light on possible pathways forward. This paper will draw from Pacific peoples' learnings, to inform theoretical and practical approaches to tourism resilience. A critical examination of Pacific tourism exchanges, policy design and adaptation using an action research approach is necessary to identify innovative opportunities for improved tourism practice (Pyke et al., 2018; Espiner et al., 2017). Such an approach can create prospects for realising regenerative tourism (Matunga & Ulrich, 2020; Bellato et al., 2022), regional integration (PIF, 2015) and grassroots resilience building (Jones & Wynn, 2019) across the Pacific, extending tourism resilience theory and practice beyond the current war over tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020) and its accompanying polarised debates. Since the pandemic struck, the research team has researched how indigenous Pacific communities have adapted in the face of this major disruption to their livelihoods, and wellbeing. This paper complements those efforts by providing insights into the conduct and theoretical underpinnings of our research.

Research Methods

A multi-sited qualitative approach is used in this research, including online surveys, talanoa and tok stori (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) (conversational interviews) with stakeholders, and interviews (in-person, and via Zoom) with Pacific tourism experts (Pyke et al., 2018). It also employs action-based research methods, complementing the study's decolonising spirit, dovetailing with the researchers' overall motivation to conduct research that can inform the reimagining of tourism policy and practice, ultimately translating into meaningful outcomes for Pacific peoples. This multi-dimensional approach to research highlights the mechanisms at work and relationships that must be strengthened between diverse actors, policies, and practices; action research will further resilience building more strategically and systematically (Cheer, 2020; Guo et al., 2018).

The principles of action research are utilised and embedded within all facets of the study, engaging in systematic and intentional inquiry, where the focus is on bringing about change in practice, improving outcomes, and empowering people (Prasad et al., 2018; Scheyvens et al. 2014). Key to this research is the researchers' involvement in sharing findings in innovative ways (such as via blogs, social media and videos), and empowering stakeholders to participate actively in knowledge creation and ownership. Action research methods are adapted to the Pacific context, drawing from Pacific approaches to research and pre-existing connections and networks within the Pacific tourism setting.

By situating Pacific people and key tourism stakeholders as knowledge producers, action research fundamentally shifts research implications beyond the academic realm, influencing and becoming part of more deliberate and participatory change processes.

This research respects Pacific knowledge and epistemologies. It engages sensitively and ethically with Pacific participants. As such, the postcolonial framing of this study is necessary. Nabobo-Baba notes that research can allow the silenced to speak through decolonising research methods that will take cognisance of indigenous philosophies, cultural worldviews and processes (Nabobo-Baba, 2008, p. 26). This approach, as will be seen in later parts of this paper, is implicit in the stakeholder loop of the Tourism Resilience Framework (Figure 2), which involves inquiry, involvement, and reflection between stakeholders, centering Pacific voices and situating Pacific people as key knowledge producers. While the multi-faceted nature of this research could be perceived as a challenge to this, that it can be an effective approach to research in the Pacific, displacing the "us and them" binary, recognising that there are "multiple methods for knowing the past and each other and multiple forms for knowledge production, and be articulated by multiple positioned subjects" (Teiawa, 2004:231).

Much of the analysis for this research is undertaken collaboratively with tourism stakeholders and members of the community in workshops and follow-up discussions, the outcomes and findings of which will be the subject of forthcoming publications. This deliberate inclusion of stakeholders within the complex knowledge creation process encourages civic engagement in research and provides an opportunity to share ownership, responsibility and pride in the outcomes

Complex adaptive systems and the Tourism Resilience Framework (TRF)

Social and ecological systems theory (Folke, 2006; Buckley, 1968) coupled with resilience theory can build phenomenological and multi-disciplinary understandings of tourism in Pacific Island countries. In this research on resilience, we extend complex systems theory beyond academic spaces to inform and become part of a reciprocal process of transformational change required to build tourism resilience and flourishing in the face of future shocks (Folke, 2006; Lew and Cheer, 2017). Thus, we conceptualise Pacific tourism as a complex adaptive system, which can then inform tourism reorganisation in the face of the global pandemic. By exploring the adaptive practices of a diverse range of stakeholders in tourism-dependent destinations of the Pacific we aim to both advance resilience knowledge, and direct action for change. Specifically, we investigate complex adaptive systems theory (Holland, 2006; Faith et al., 2015), adding to the Resilience Cycle, also known as Holling's Loop (Holling, 1973) (Fig.1), a heuristic model developed to understand the macro processes of change in any complex adaptive system such as tourism. This can help to identify structural patterns and emergent trends as they go through dynamic, nonlinear change processes involving a feedback loop (Allen et al., 2010). Systems change is concerned with understanding the mechanics of adaptive systems such as tourism and their ability to alter behaviour and respond to sudden environmental shocks (Walker et al., 2004).

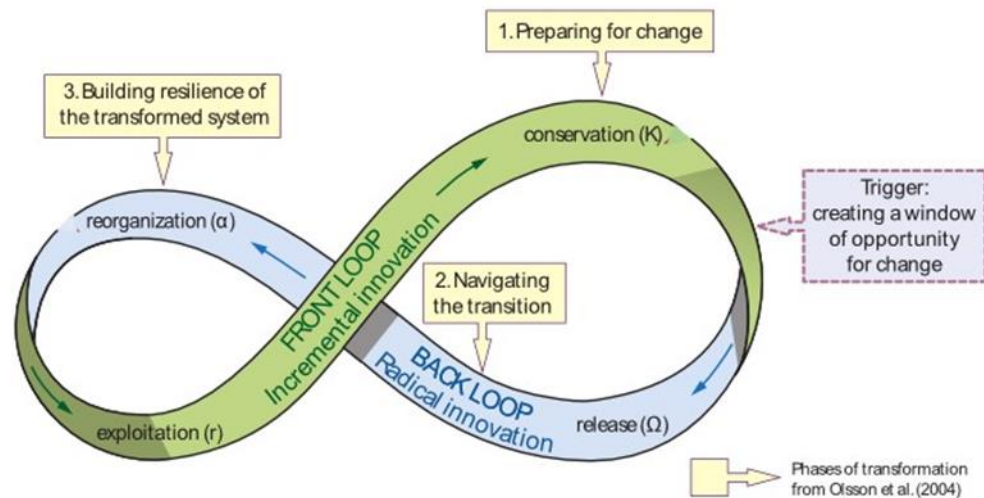


Figure 1. Holling's Loop, (modified from Olsson et al., 2004)

Fig.1 indicates how a 'trigger' (such as COVID-19 or a cyclone) can lead to radical innovation in a system. The first phase of Holling's Loop is the exploitation stage, where a new environment (e.g. development of tourism as an economic opportunity) is characterised by growth, expansion and increasing complexity, successfully reoriented after a crisis (Olsson et al. 2004). Positive feedback can take hold of an emergent pattern and rapidly scale it up, as evidenced by the upward rise of tourism within countries such as Fiji and Vanuatu's economic and social spaces over the past three decades (Connell, 2021; Gounder, 2020). This is followed by the conservation stage, a state of equilibrium and stability as the tourism system has reached a high level of complexity and connection between its parts. This high level of tourism specialisation weakens resilience by permitting systems to become dependent upon the prevailing conditions. This reduces the ability of the system to adapt to external disturbances such as the recent Covid19 pandemic. The release phase is one of crisis and collapse when an external disorder destroys the system (Holling, 2001). A feature of the release phase is emergent leadership when actors not tasked with leadership roles formerly assume critical positions during a crisis. The reorganisation phase is when the system begins to recover from falling apart. It is a creative time, when change can take a variety of possible directions, and the system can move into various new stability domains. Therefore, it is critical to explore how the tourism system can reorganise, as the direction of this will determine which of several alternative future states will likely emerge in the growth stage that follows reorganisation and reorientation.

While Holling's Loop helps explain and predict the dynamic, complex adaptive change process, it does not focus on stakeholder voices and power as active components within the system, or on a tourism destination setting (Anderson & Guo, 2020; Djalante, 2012; Becken, 2013). Tourism stakeholders and institutions must be conceptualised as living entities capable of adaptive responses and complex behaviours that can either bring about resilient outcomes for the Pacific, or, conversely, contribute to further weakening of the system. Previous research shows that some stakeholders are responsive to change and are potentially emergent leaders who can innovate effectively, whereas others are not; this also appears to be the case with tourism industry leaders. Understanding how complex responses enable a timely 'reset' of tourism is critical if stakeholder voices are to be acknowledged and to form part of the resilience-building process. To achieve this, we propose a new framework as a pathway for achieving a resilience action interface. The Tourism Resilience Framework (Fig. 2) complements Holling's phases and feedback loop (Fig. 1) with an overlapping circle of

stakeholder voices. This new loop comprises people, government, businesses and ecological concerns (nature) (Mika & Scheyvens, 2021) within a dynamic, participatory and dialogical system. This complementary loop highlights a convergence point where stakeholders' voices, agency, and ability to shift, connect and decide on how to build resilience.



Figure 2. *Tourism Resilience Framework*

This framework will also enable researchers to move beyond purely theoretical implications, with the 'action research interface' located at the intersection of the two loops in Fig.2. This is where the adaptive cycle overlaps with the social and ecological system elements (stakeholder groups) – providing a point of entry where stakeholders, their voices and their collaborative vision can be fed into the existing Holling's Loop to ascertain more holistic and deliberate directions for resilience building. The model is intended to promote the voices of local stakeholders and empower them to be active participants in determining their futures. The Tourism Resilience Framework allows for a cycle of inquiry, involvement, and reflection between stakeholders, extending the bounds of action research, which is theoretically concerned with connecting theory, stakeholder voices and practice in a cyclical and ongoing process (Anderson & Guo, 2020). Thus, the Tourism Resilience Framework is theoretically innovative and provides concrete action for the future sustainability of the Pacific tourism industry and perhaps other regions in the world.

Conclusions

This paper has challenged long-held neo-colonial narratives and predominantly capitalist views that frame tourism resilience as a rapid return to its former state. Instead, the article asserts that resilience building must involve an inclusive and self-determined process that considers the many complexities and voices within the tourism space. In this research, that means recognising the agency and power of Pacific tourism stakeholders is key to building resilience in the face of a wide range of future shocks and perturbations. The Tourism Resilience Framework is consequently proposed to guide the process of reimagining and restructuring tourism, leaning on the power, knowledge and expertise of local tourism stakeholders as part of an action-based research approach. While our research is ongoing,

emerging trends that support the utility of the Tourism Resilience Framework in creating more conversations and action within the Pacific tourism development space are being observed. Importantly, we seek to incubate ideas on how resilience may be operationalised in a manner that spurs relationship building, partnerships, increased synergies and points of convergence for a shared pathway for more resilient tourism futures that is by Pacific and for Pacific people.

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