Mandatory social offsetting in tourism: we want you!

What is it about?

Tourism is wildly beneficial for the economy but comes at profound cost (Fahimi, et al., 2018; Santamaria & Filis, 2019). Directly due to tourist behaviour, significant burden is placed on the environment (Ehigiamusoe, 2020; Paramati et al., 2017; Wang & Wang, 2018). Changes are required to make tourism more sustainable due to the rise of its accessibility in an ever-more connected world (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). Rather than aiming only for the reduction of negative impact, this essay proposes utilising tourism as a positive force, through what is coined here as "social offsetting". Tourists will be allocated points to fulfil through pro-environmental behaviour, to offset their environmental impact and directly benefit the communities they visit (see *Figure 1*). The current essay will briefly cover the current landscape of tourism, the premises underlying the proposal, the proposal for social offsetting's application to tourism, and directions for the future.

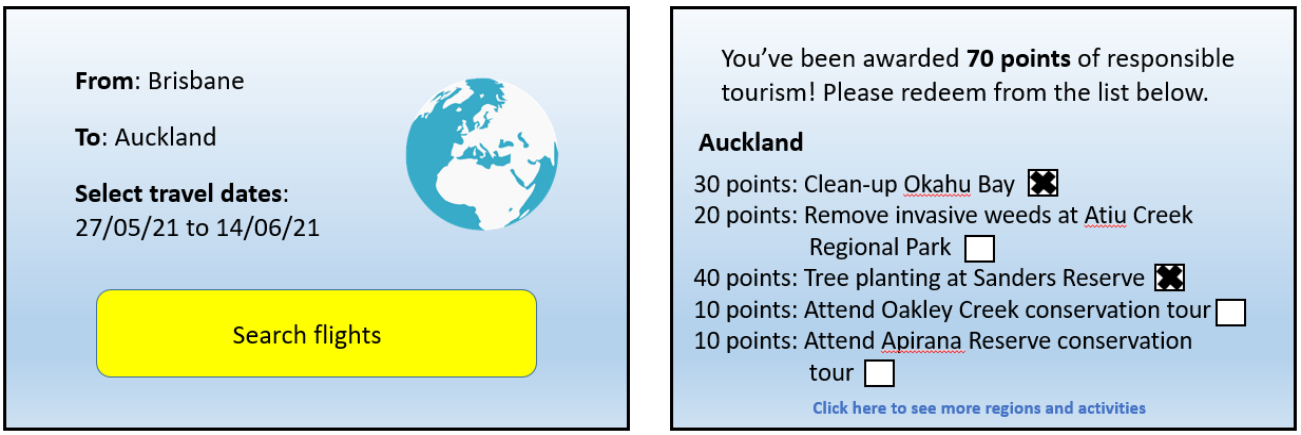

Figure 1. Social offsetting's point allocation.

Why is it important?

Tourism's contribution to the economy is substantial; it accounts for 10.3% of GDP and 330 million jobs, which is one in 10 globally (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). For this reason, it is important to address tourism's shortcomings in a way that does not damage its economic value. Tourism's shortcomings, however, represent significant and pressing issues. The environmental impact of tourism shapes the future landscape for the entire world, not only the tourism industry. While some factors of tourism's environmental impact are not within the direct control of the tourist (for example the use of jet fuel without a current alternative), many are the direct result of tourist behaviour. Food waste (Li & Wang,

2020), water usage (Becken, 2014) and littering (Sklodowski, 2011) are all environmental costs from tourists and ones that could be reduced by modifying their individual behaviour. The urgency of this issue lies in tourism's growth, which in 2018 outstripped the rise of GPD for the eighth year in a row (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). Related to this growth; is predicted that tourism's consumption of water and land use will increase between 92% and 189% by 2050 (Gössling & Peeters, 2015). Ultimately, while tourism can be highly beneficial for local economies (Fahimi, et al., 2018; Santamaria & Filis, 2019), as well as globally (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019), the combination of its exponential growth with its damage to the environment means it desperately requires change for a more sustainable future.

What are the premises?

Despite their negative impact, tourists are powerful agents of change, due their power for flexibility through individual decision-making (d'Adda, et al., 2017). However, pro-environmental behaviour is notoriously difficult to cultivate (Siegel et al., 2018), particularly in a pleasure-focused setting such as tourism (Bilynets & Knežević Cvelbar, 2020). One highly successful method of behaviour change is the mandating of behaviours (Bilz & Nadler, 2014). The history of mandating behaviour's related to societal issues is rich and broad in scope; including the outlawing of chewing gum in Singapore, legal requirement of seatbelts and even inclusion of disability in the workforce (Alma & Liran, 2003; Fisher & Purcal, 2017; Rajah, 2014). To use mandatory seatbelts in the USA as an example, the country saw an increase from 31% usage 1984 when the first state enforced the law, to 65% in 1998 when all states (except New Hampshire) legally enforced seatbelt usage (Alma & Liran, 2003). This illustrates the profound strength of mandating behaviour on creating behaviour change. Beyond this direct effect of behaviour change, legislation can have the indirect effect of attitude change and behavioural spillover (Fisher & Purcal, 2017).

By virtue of mandating behaviours, the moral implications of this behaviour become salient, creating spillover into attitude change. Laws are considered society's effort to reduce negative and increase positive behaviour, thereby both describing and prescribing a right and wrong, which people internalise (Bilz & Nadler, 2014). One basis for this attitude change is cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance refers to the discomfort caused by contradictory thoughts and/or actions (Festinger, 1959). In the case of laws, because people cannot change their actions, they instead change their attitudes to align with their behaviours, to avoid the

discomfort of contradiction. For example, following anti-discrimination legislation, there were improvements in attitudes towards people with disabilities, which was in part due to spillover (Fisher & Purcal, 2017). Behaviours similarly spillover, where people alter their behaviours to be in-line to reduce cognitive dissonance (d'Adda, Capraro, & Tavoni, 2017).

One contrary school of thought to cognitive dissonance is the theory of compensatory behaviour (Mandel et al., 2017). While cognitive dissonance suggests surrounding behaviours will align with mandated behaviours to avoid internal conflict, the theory of compensatory behaviour suggests that surrounding behaviours will differ significantly to mandated ones (Mandel et al., 2017). This is because people believe their opposing behaviour will be averaged out by the mandatory ones and therefore this licenses them to act in ways they usually would not (Mandel et al., 2017). However, there is little evidence for this effect, and none in the cases of seatbelts, chewing gum or anti-discrimination laws (Alma & Liran, 2003; Fisher & Purcal, 2017; Rajah, 2014).

How can these challenges be addressed?

Given the increasing rate of tourism and its environmental burden, it is vital to improve the sustainability of tourism for the future. Considering the collective power of tourists, this represents an opportunity to not only be less harmful but instead beneficial. The proposal for this is mandated prosocial behaviour as a condition of tourism. This is termed here as "social offsetting", which refers to using tourists' social power through volunteering to offset their environmental impact. Rather than decreasing rates of tourism and damaging its economic value, this approach aims to maintain or even increase tourist levels. In order to maintain the satisfaction of tourists, this will be marketed as a positive and in-depth experience, while also prescribing a positive moral norm by virtue of being mandated (Bilz & Nadler, 2014). To implement this, it is proposed that tourists, when booking flights to their destination or accommodation, will be allocated a number of points depending on the length of their stay. Tourists staying under four days will be required to give a small fee to local initiatives for sustainability, while those staying longer will be allocated 5-points per day after four days. Tourists are required to choose from a list of activities which have an associated point value related to their difficulty, until they have reached the point value assigned to them. If they wish not to engage in these activities, they will need to pay a sustainability contribution to the destination. For example, a tourist who goes for an 18-day holiday would be allocated 70-points (five per day after the first four days) and may spend 30

of them on cleaning up a local beach for an afternoon, and 40 on a morning planting trees in a local reforestation area (see *Figure 1*).

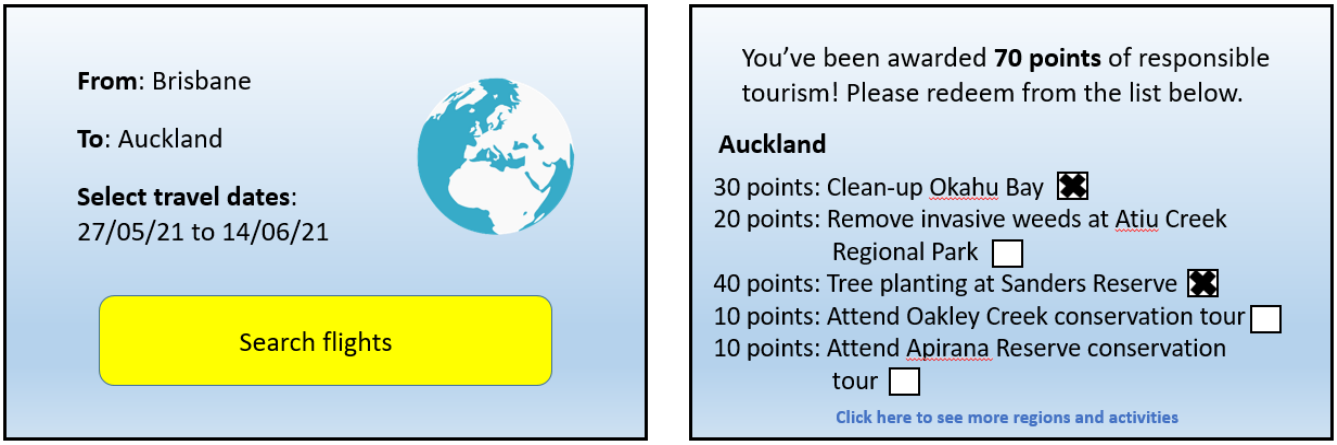

Figure 1. Social offsetting's point allocation.

Tourists would be required to attend the activity they sign up for on booking, facing a fine if they do not. This fine would go back to local initiatives for sustainability. The nature of the activities will be specific to the location, as to what are important and current issues to the local area. For example, locations with high instances of litter will have multiple locations and activities surrounding the clean-up of rubbish. In doing so, not only will local communities directly benefit from tourist contributions of either time or money, but the effects may extend indirectly. By engaging in these pro-environmental behaviours, this will induce cognitive dissonance if tourists act unsustainably elsewhere in their trip. Attitude change resulting from this cognition will amplify this effect, as it will be easier for tourists to adjust their attitudes towards sustainability, since the actions of being sustainable or donating towards local sustainability are mandated. Therefore, through this approach, tourists will be directly beneficial to destinations through their mandated behaviour and donations, and indirectly benefit through spillover of improved sustainable attitudes and behaviours to other areas of their trip.

What remains to be seen?

The negative impacts of tourism will only increase as the industry grows. Therefore, it is imperative to take leaps towards a more sustainable future. In the past, legislation has proved to be one of the most effective methods to change behaviour. The associated potential for attitude change and behavioural spillover make this option both a powerful direct and indirect method to give tourism a impact positive for the environment. While this proposal

focuses on the environmental future of tourism, the opportunities for tourism's power as a force for good are limitless. Cultural erosion is another cost from tourism and one that could be addressed by tourist action towards cultural preservation through altering the activities to be culturally focused. Any problems a local community face, which people-power can help, are ones that could benefit from this model. Volunteering sustains many groups addressing societal issues, yet companies are often scrambling to make up numbers (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). An estimated 25 million tourists arrived per year in 1950, compared to the average of 1.4 billion in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019). If each tourist only gave a fraction of their time back to the communities they enjoy their holidays in, we could create immense change towards a better and more sustainable future.

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