
Reflections on the theme issue outcomes: How could rural tourism provide better support for well-being and socio-economic development?

Theme Editors: Ardhendu Shekhar Singh, Sanjai K. Parahoo, Madhavi Ayyagari and Thanika D. Juwaheer share their reflections on the significance and outcomes of the theme issue with Managing Editor Richard Teare.

Overview

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, rural tourism assumed greater prominence as demand increased for less densely populated tourist destinations. This theme issue concludes that if managed well, rural tourism can play a key role in sustainable development and the well-being of host communities. The issue also explores how rural tourism features, events, activities and services can be adjusted so that they are attractive to tourists, and at the same time, enhance socio-cultural and economic development for those living in host communities. A list of the articles in this issue can be found in the Appendix.

Why in your view, is your theme issue strategic question important?

Rural tourism has been an important tourism segment for several years now, and it has become even more prominent in recent times with the recognition of the transformative role that it can play in sustainable development and the well-being of tourism host communities. There has been a steady exodus of inhabitants from rural to urban areas due to a lack of livelihood opportunities, and at the same time, on the demand side, a growing number of tourists are looking for authentic and distinctive experiences, with current trends such as family volunteering, immersive experiences, gastronomic tourism, ecotourism and adventure tourism opening up new development opportunities for rural areas. All this presents an opportunity to valorise and enhance the current provision of rural tourism services while contributing to the literature on rural tourism as a transformative service.

In this issue, we sought to develop solutions for re-imagining rural area features, events, activities and services in order to make them attractive to tourists and to relate rural tourism with the socio-cultural, economic development and well-being of rural inhabitants. The findings provide insights in the form of success stories, best practices, new ideas, critical success factors, caveats and strategy options to capitalize on the emerging demand for unique tourist experiences. The analysis in this theme issue should be helpful to policy makers as they develop marketing strategies with the aim of attracting tourists to rural areas and with the positioning of rural tourism assets, training, developing, empowering rural tourism stakeholders and overcoming the challenges facing sustainable rural tourism development.



Thinking about your theme issue plan and approach, what worked well?

Our overarching aim was to assess the role of rural tourism in the socio-cultural and economic development of the local region. At the outset, our extensive literature review enabled us to

identify different perspectives and approaches and to draw up a list of potential topics that would enable us to explore the issue of rural tourism. We identified prominent academics in the different focal areas, and we sought representation from different geographical regions with unique cultural traditions in order to capture diverse views on the topics. Next, we spent time explaining to the authors the nature of the journal and its emphasis on generating practical solutions to the problems being faced by the sector, and on finding novel initiatives to be shared with a larger audience.

During the short listing of submissions from the authors, we sought to achieve synergy between the topics covered. We believe the articles in this issue complement each other well and are embedded in the main theme issue question. Additionally, a rigorous review process helped authors in refining and aligning their articles with the broader question that the theme issue sought to address. We are delighted with the results in terms of the connectedness of the overall article collection and the solutions offered to different stakeholders in managing and developing rural tourism.

How did you engage with different stakeholder groups?

We identified a list of potential authors via a literature search of those who are engaged in writing and research in this area. We also sought recommendations from a journal editor, and prioritised authors engaged closely with initiatives on the ground. Thereafter, we approached the shortlisted academics with a request to write an article centred on our proposed theme and also to brief them on the unique style of *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*. The list of proposed topics (without author names) was shared with them to ensure the coverage of different perspectives and to avoid overlaps. Additionally, we sought to ensure representation of rural tourism initiatives from different countries and regions for a balanced approach to planning the issue. Once we had set our expectations for the theme issue and the kinds of outcomes we wanted to achieve, it was relatively straightforward in terms of helping our writing team to focus on both the practical and theoretical implications of their contribution.

What were the highlights from stakeholder group interactions?

For us, a highlight of the issue is its focus on the way we can address the existing problems facing rural tourism development via the practical and implementable solutions aligned with the socio-cultural traditions of rural community locations. The writing team used various methods to interact with stakeholders and to collect insightful data from the rural tourism initiatives across various geographical regions. Arising from this, we believe that the practical recommendations that have emerged will be helpful to policy makers as well as practitioners.

Thinking about your peer review process: What went well and why?

We had a three-tier review process in place to ensure both academically and practically valuable content. In the first phase, we put in place a double-blind peer review with invited reviewers, followed by theme editor reviewing in the second round and finally the managing editor who undertook the third review and made minor changes for clarity of expression. All members of the reviewing team were briefed about the unique nature of the journal and the review process. We were delighted that a sense of team spirit emerged as we sought to address a common goal with consensus on this objective from the outset. In fact, the entire writing team endorsed our vision for the theme issue which was to generate a list of practical and implementable solutions to the different issues under consideration.

As theme editors, we also actively participated in the review process by summarising review comments and providing further feedback to ensure that each article was as closely aligned with the objectives as possible and that overall, the collection was synergetic in nature.

What are the most significant outcomes of your theme issue in terms of the contributions to knowledge and/or professional practice?

The seven articles investigate contemporary issues pertaining to rural tourism and its contribution to socio-economic development in diverse geographical regions (Asia: Thailand and India; Australia: Western Australia; Middle East: UAE and Jordan; and Europe: Portugal). They complement each other in terms of the diversity of focus areas in support of the valorisation of rural tourism. Further, they can be classified into four clusters: (1) cultural traditions; (2) support for rural tourism service providers; (3) embracing new technologies and (4) community-led initiatives.

Underlying these clusters is implicit recognition of a gradual and organic rural tourism development process. In conclusion, we proposed a conceptual framework with four critical success factors for sustainable rural tourism and development. Finally, we feel that the practical recommendations arising from the writing team provide a rich set of pertinent approaches that could be adopted or adapted for use by local stakeholders.

What are the implications for management action and applied research arising from your theme issue outcomes?

The implications for management action and applied research are numerous and are derived from the recommendations made by the writing team. Arising from this, our conceptual model will in our view and will be helpful in designing a strategy for developing sustainable rural tourism projects. It includes (1) stakeholder engagement and support for capacity-building; (2) a recommendation of gradual and organic growth (3) valorisation of socio-cultural traditions and preservation of cultural heritage and (4) leveraging digital technology in marketing strategy.

Having served as a *WHATT* theme editor, what did you enjoy about the experience?

The focus of the journal on real-world impact gave us a unique experience of academic writing. The review process also provided each of us with a learning opportunity. We were able to contribute to knowledge generation and also to the development of rural tourism in general. As an outcome, we feel sure that the outcomes of the theme issue will be helpful in the context of many similar initiatives around the world. We are thankful to the journal for creating an outlet that facilitates interaction between academics and practitioners, and we were enriched by the experience of dealing with a diverse writing team working towards a common goal of providing some solutions to problems confronting rural tourism development. Overall, we feel that we were able to advance the field of rural tourism theoretically as well as practically. In summary, we enjoyed working with a diverse team of writers and we would like to thank each of them. We are also grateful to the *WHATT* Managing Editor, Dr Richard Teare for his constant and timely support and encouragement.

About the Theme Editors:

Ardhendu Shekhar Singh is associate professor at Symbiosis School of Banking and Finance, Pune, India. His research interest lies in the area of non-profit marketing and development finance.

Sanjai K. Parahoo is associate professor and program chair for management and financial studies (PG) at Hamdan bin Mohammed Smart University in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Madhavi Ayyagari is Executive Director of Mindsbourg Management Consultancy (UAE and India). She has experience across corporate, consulting and education sectors in a number of countries.

Thanika Devi Juwaheer is Associate Professor, Department of Management, Faculty of Law and Management of the University of Mauritius.

Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes (WHATT) aims to make a practical and theoretical contribution to hospitality and tourism development, and we seek to do this by using a key question to focus attention on an industry issue. If you would like to contribute to our work by serving as a *WHATT* theme editor, do please contact the Managing Editor, Dr Richard Teare via the Emerald website.

Appendix

Theme issue contents (WHATT v15 n1 2023)

Introduction: How could rural tourism provide better support for well-being and socio-economic development?

Ardhendu Shekhar Singh, Sanjai K Parahoo, Madhavi Ayyagari and Thanika D Juwaheer

Provides an overview of the articles in this theme issue that together demonstrate the potential role of rural tourism in promoting the socio-economic development of rural communities. They also suggest frameworks for further research and provide case studies of innovation and adaptation.

Phygital rural cultural heritage: a digitalisation approach for destination recovery and resilience

Kaewta Muangasame and Eunice Tan

Focuses on the cultural heritage tourism strategy adopted by a rural community across the physical–digital–phygital spectrum to augment its sustainable tourism development during a time of crisis. The study adopts a local engagement approach to develop a cooperative, community heritage management strategy.

Female economic empowerment through tourism training in the United Arab Emirates

Mohit Vij, Amitabh Upadhya, Kakul Agha, Fauzia Jabeen, Vazeerjaan Begum, Basma Waleed Kashmoola and John Senior

The issue of female economic empowerment in the Middle East and the North Africa region (MENA) has not as yet been fully explored. This study explores how to conceptualize, design and conduct tourism training to empower women in the United Arab Emirates.

Wine tourism in rural areas – hopes and fears amongst local residents

Elisabeth Kastenholz, Arminda Paço and Ana Nave

Analyzes residents' impact perceptions and attitudes towards wine tourism development in a Portuguese hinterland region. This approach can be used to inform wine route managers about possible implications and to guide possible interventions for sustainable regional tourism development.

Integrating indigenous knowledge and rural tourism in Kongthong, the “whistling village” of India

Saurabh Kumar Dixit, Kimberley Camelia S. Langstieh and Abijith Abraham

Observes that rural tourism activities in Kongthong go hand in hand with understanding indigenous knowledge. Concludes that governing bodies and the local community are on the right path to achieving potential growth and preserving the village as a holistic rural tourist destination.

Tourism as a transformative economic agent in regional Australia: a case study of operators’ use of social media

Eliza Vlasich, Diane Lee and Catherine Archer

Utilizes a case study approach to explore how local tourism providers in the Shire of Collie, Western Australia, a coal-mining region, use social media to promote their businesses and the destination. The article provides insights on their experiences as they aim to transform their tourism offering.

Rural tourism in India: case studies of resilience during crisis

Rajesh K Aithal, R K Anil and Dechen Angmo

Provides a study of three organizations involved in rural tourism during the COVID-19 crisis and draws out lessons for similar organizations; Observes the importance of a good team supporting the business, increased digital engagement and the need to diversify the customer base.

Rural and traditional cafes and restaurants: a new emerging trend in domestic tourism

Wlla Obeidat

Analyzes the emergence of traditional cafes and restaurants and their role in rural tourism development. This phenomenon is linked to local efforts to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the series of lockdowns that accompanied it.

Conclusion: How could rural tourism provide better support for well-being and socio-economic development?

Ardhendu Shekhar Singh, Sanjai K Parahoo, Madhavi Ayyagari and Thanika D Juwaheer

Examines different facets of rural tourism that are critical to short-term recovery as well as long-term sustainable development. The article also summarizes the theme issue findings and proposes a conceptual model for the benefit of stakeholders involved in developing sustainable rural tourism projects.