Slow food tourism: an ethical microtrend for the Anthropocene

Francesc Fusté-Forné and Tazim Jamal

Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to discuss Slow Food Tourism (SFT) as an ethical paradigm and important tourism microdriver to address sustainability and climate change. Its key principles are based on slow, sustainable, secure and democratic processes for SFT.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper draws on published research to identify ethical parameters for a slow food paradigm for tourism.*

Findings – *Within the context of a global, technological and rapidly changing world, SFT is a pathway to contribute to locally based agricultural and food practices for sustainable development, food security, social sustainability and community well-being. SFT visitors are active participants in ecological, cultural and heritage conservation through co-creating with local producers the sociability, enjoyment and sharing of bioregional foods in diverse ethnic and cultural spaces.*

Originality/value – *This research advocates that SFT is an important microtrend that supports a much-needed paradigm shift toward a conscious way of slow living, sustainable travel and responsible food production–consumption to help address the climate crisis and global environmental challenges in the Anthropocene.*

Keywords *Sustainability, Climate change, Ethics, Gastronomy, Slow food tourism*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

Food tourism at destinations continues to attract increasing numbers of visitors. Eight out of ten visitors are influenced by culinary attractions when choosing a destination, and food and gastronomy accounting for 40 per cent of the world's tourism expenditure (Europa Press, 2019). In Spain, for instance, 15 per cent of tourists are motivated by food and gastronomy, and their budget is 20 per cent higher than average tourists (KPMG, 2019). Gastronomic practices of tasting, eating, sharing and learning about food generally involve interactions with individual or family-owned enterprises, many of which are steeped in cultural heritage and intergenerational knowledge and livelihoods on the land (Stone *et al.*, 2018). But much more is at stake here than unique food experiences. Destinations worldwide face an existential threat from climate change and deteriorating environmental sustainability – sobering realities of "progress" in late modernity being measured by economic "growth" driven by industrial production and high speed competition in globalized capital markets. A paradigm shift slowing a frenetic consumer society is needed and Slow Food Tourism (SFT) is emerging as an important microtrend within the slow movement (slow foods, slow cities, slow travel and slow tourism) to address sustainability in the Anthropocene (Yeoman and McMahon-Beatte, 2016). As discussed in the following text, the SFT ethic of *slow*, *sustainable* and *secure* is facilitated by diversity, communality, sociality and *citizen democracy* (Lappé, 1991).

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Slow food tourism: Promises and challenges

United Nation climate reports continue to reinforce that climate change is the most critical driver shaping the future of tourism and planetary sustainability in the 21st century (see www.un.org/en/climatechange/reports.shtml). While air travel rapidly moving growing numbers of international visitors is complicit in exacerbating climate injustices, particularly in the Global South, the overall service sector and providers of food and hospitality services contribute far more than it first appears (Lenzen *et al.*, 2018). Mass tourism is dependent on a globalized system of large-scale industrial agriculture which, contrary to the claims of the green revolution, has historically entrenched underdevelopment, dependence, poverty and loss of food security (Wise, 2019). It is a significant contributor to climate change, destruction of the local and global commons, and adverse impacts on environmental and human health (Shiva, 2000). Calls for slow tourism and slow food experiences reflect the need for a conscious, active way of being and living oriented not to speeded-up lifestyles driven by mass consumption, business competition and jockeying for market position, but to *slow*, responsible, mindful relationships and practices that foster resilience, sustainability and social plus ecological well-being.

Living and traveling an ethic of "slow"

As Fullagar *et al.* (2012: p. 18) explain, an ethic of "slow is embodied in the qualities of rhythm, pace, tempo and velocity that are produced in the sensory and affective relationship between the traveller and the world." It is reflected in a number of social movements including the Slow Food and Slow City movements, Slow Tourism and Slow Travel (Dickinson *et al.*, 2011). The Slow Food movement was initiated by Carlo Petrini in 1986 in response to the arrival of McDonald's fast food restaurant in a culturally significant area of Rome. Its principles of *good*, *clean* and *fair* (see www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-philosophy/) guide aesthetic taste, promoting "locally sourced ingredients, traditional recipes and taking time to source, prepare and enjoy food" (Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2010: p. 80), and sustain environmental health, countering damage to human health due to fast food and fast lifestyles, as well as ensuring fair labor and work practices (Andrews, 2008). The Slow Food manifesto also calls for "virtuous globalization." Situated practices of indigenous, artisanal and handmade food by local entrepreneurs and family businesses are perceived to be crucial to facilitate resilience and resistance to exploitation and neoliberal globalization (Sidali *et al.*, 2015). As Frost and Laing (2013: p. 68) describe, in addition to cultivating gastronomical taste and enjoyment, the movement aspires to:

> [. . .] build social capital through strong community bonds, as well as providing opportunities for controlling what one eats or how one eats it, [. . .] it is an intensely political manifesto reacting against globalization.

New spaces for slow touristic experiences have arisen over time, such as markets and festival incorporating slow food themes. The Jokkmokk Winter Market in Swedish Lapland has hosted food for over 400 years, but in 2011 Slow Tourism was an official theme, and restaurants were encouraged to meet the Slowfood Sápmi organization's criteria of "gott, rent, och rättvist" (enjoyable, ecological and fair; de la Barre and Brouder, 2013: p. 8). Laing and Frost (2010: p. 263) describe various events with slow food as an overarching theme, such as A Taste of Slow' Festival in Melbourne, Australia, the Slow Food Nation Festival in San Francisco, USA, and the Slow Food Movement's Salone del Gusto in Torino, Italy. The Salone del Gusto has a more political and anti-globalization agenda, involving a *presidium* that supports small food producers and local food varieties, biodiversity conservation, traditional knowledge and food security (Siniscalchi, 2013).

A "terroir" of holistic relationships

The slow food movement valorizes artisanal, handmade and quality local foods that offer rich aesthetic experiences and are a conduit to sense of place and *terroir* – a term that "encapsulates the idea that a particular interplay of geography, history and human factors imbues foods with a particular taste that cannot be recreated elsewhere" (Musgrave, 2009: p. 158). It is associated with a humanistic principle of pleasure that contributes to happiness and well-being (Dunlap, 2012; Hall and Sharples, 2003) and celebrates cultural and culinary heritages (Miele and Murdoch, 2002). It is in play in all forms of *slow* experiences that offer bioregional food experiences to residents and visitors (urban and rural), which are convivial and rooted in the local "terroir." For instance, SFT can be seen to take place within homestay programs, small-scale ecotourism and farm visits, farmers markets, street food experiences and small-scale food enterprises. In these local, personalized spaces, small-scale producers, accommodation hosts and food service providers co-create with consumers enjoyable reflective experiences celebrating ethnic and cultural diversity, enabling provisioning and alternative economies (Berno and Fusté-Forné, 2019; Stone *et al.*, 2018).

A niche specialty product such as cheese produced by small rural producers (Fusté-Forné, 2015) offers such a slow, holistic gastronomical opportunity to enjoy cheese tasting, explore the rural landscape and contribute to sustainable livelihoods and social well-being. It enables visitors along with the residents to be active rather than passive consumers, to engage in sociality, dialogue, storytelling and cultural exchange with local providers. They can make informed choices on what they wish to eat, understand where it comes from, how it is grown and distributed, how it affects ecological health and our health. Grounded in such a relational ethic, these acts can facilitate environmental stewardship and *citizen democracy*, as empowered, informed and engaged individuals in rich relationships with the earth and each other (Lappé, 1991), and as *global cosmopolitan citizens* (Clancy, 2017; Jamal, 2019). As Wendell Berry says, "eating is an agricultural act" and the industrial eater is a passive, uncritical eater who no longer knows the connection between food, farming and the land (Berry, 1992). By contrast, slow food tourists recognize the need to shift from unsustainable industrial agriculture and its neoliberal capitalist ethic to a healthier, more conscious way of living and caring for the ecological systems and spaces that sustain the planet's inhabitants (human and non-human).

Challenges for SFT in the Anthropocene

Reflecting on the outcomes of industrial, late modern capitalism, neoliberal globalization and an increasingly technological "virtual" world, must surely give one pause to recognize the sheer absurdity and unsustainability of the human condition today. Small is beautiful, said Schumacher (1973), but slow is beautiful too, and an important aspect of a paradigm shift to a more conscious lifestyle and sustainable existence. Critics of the slow food movement feel it is a niche activity and are concerned about Eurocentrism stemming from its origin in Italy (Laudan, 2004). It should be noted, however, that the small producer ethic ranges worldwide in numerous alternatives spaces and alternative economies, such as small shareholdings, community and microenterprises, cooperatives funded by microcredit, etc. Here, sustainability practices may include zero-waste farming, growing cover crops and genetically diverse crops, maintaining community seed banks, incorporating gendered, Indigenous and traditional knowledges, etc. (Shiva, 2000; Wise, 2019). Diversity, difference and pluralistic ways of valorizing bioregional foods and sharing *slow* hospitality with visitors in these small agricultural spaces should help to facilitate economic sustainability and food security amidst daunting global environmental challenges, including population growth and the climate crisis.

Increasing vulnerabilities due to climate change (Dogru *et al.*, 2019) means that small producers will face greater uncertainty in anticipating and preparing for variability of food-based tourist activities (Fusté-Forné, 2019). An important issue lies here is tackling the challenging carbon footprint of travel, particularly long-haul air travel (Lenzen *et al*, 2018). Hall (2006: 307) made an early link between the Slow Food movement and Slow Tourism, which he described as travel that enables the visitor to:

> [...] stay in a place longer and get to know the area much more thoroughly as a visitor that deliberately seeks to buy local, thereby ensuring that money stays within the destination.

But did that mean, he mused, that one should travel only locally to minimize "food miles" and support local food production and consumption, and what did it mean about the rural and peripheral areas outside of metropolitan centers which might most need SFT's economic benefits?

Observing the growth of slow tourism in the Arctic, de la Barre and Brouder (2013: p. 219) also note the paradox of climate change and food security in the storied landscapes in which Aboriginal ways of living with the land and their food are shared between the First Nations and visitors (e.g. at wilderness camps during a guided tour, or at community festivals or events related to heritage and cultural programming). On the one hand, SFT can help address climate injustices and nurture food security by contributing to local well-being, biodiversity conservation and caring for land. On the other hand, the vulnerability of places to climate change may require staying closer to home. It will be increasingly important for tourism destinations and service providers to strive toward being carbon neutral in a circular economy that conserves land and resources, as visitors, too, become more aware and informed on the climate crisis (Bertella and Vidmar, 2019).

The growing microtrend of gastronomical encounters and SFT will also have to contend with other microtrends such as AI and increasing automation that will increasingly threaten jobs and livelihoods. Technological innovations, however, can be used to good as well, facilitating new methods and approaches, e.g. for growing cover crops, nurturing genetic diversity, community seed banks, and a bioregional ethic of place. It provides an opportunity for local residents and (displaced) workers to get involved in culturally situated and ecologically sustainable practices. Fostering ethnically diverse ways of food production and provisioning, providing rich cultural experiences through slow food encounters, such a holistic slow food production–consumption ethic offers a way forward to "just transitions" by nurturing alternative local economies, food security and personal, place-based, and relational SFT encounters.

Toward ethical tourism futures

The potential of SFT to support healthy ecosystems, cultural heritage and local livelihoods, and to count hegemonic neoliberal pressures and industrial agriculture, makes it a powerful microtrend to reclaim the local and act on the climate crisis. The aesthetics and ethics of SFT is one of *slow* (in all spaces and places, urban and rural), *sustainable* and *secure* futures, empowering a healthy *citizen democracy* (Lappé, 1991) for planetary sustainability and reclaiming the local. A slow food ethic supports degrowth and provisioning through small-scale producers and alternative economies, promoting "virtuous globalization" as the slow movement advocates, facilitating gender equality, sustainable livelihoods and well-being – individual and communal. It enables co-production and co-consumption of food as a pleasurable experience, and caring for land and its human and non-human inhabitants through diverse, pluralistic, relational and situated practices. SFT helps to facilitate food security and contributes to human and environmental health. It is a communal endeavor, nurturing sociality, learning, celebrating and sharing cultural traditions. As such, SFT is *praxis* oriented, fostering civil society, democracy and active participants in food acts and policy actions. It is a

vital part of the paradigm shift needed to handle critical planetary issues and climate justice in the 21st century. The tourism destinations of the Anthropocene must aim toward carbon neutral and carbon zero futures, addressing the externalized costs and impacts of industrial agriculture, large-scale concentrated animal feeding operations and monoculture, carbon emissions, loss of (genetic) biodiversity, etc. (Swain *et al.*, 2018; Wise, 2019). In connecting us back to the earth, SFT must also facilitate reflection on the nature and ethics of what we eat – both as part of our daily habits and as part of our travel experiences. What is the ethical imperative for SFT to encourage greater awareness, taste and enjoyment of a reduced meat, greater plant-based diet for a small planet (Bertella and Vidmar, 2019; Lappé, 1991)?

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