

TOURISM POLICY-MAKING IN
THE CONTEXT OF CONTESTED
WICKED PROBLEMS

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ADVANCES IN CULTURE, TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY
RESEARCH VOLUME 17A

**TOURISM POLICY-MAKING IN
THE CONTEXT OF CONTESTED
WICKED PROBLEMS:
SUSTAINABILITY PARADOX,
CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND
COVID-19**

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FOREWORD

The team of editors of this 17th volume in the *Advances in Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research (ACTHR)*, Christof Pforr, Markus Pillmayer, Marion Joppe, Nicolai Scherle and Harald Pechlaner, provide a thought-provoking compendium of profound policy challenges in tourism. This volume (17A and 17B) illustrates in a compelling manner that a significant proportion of the public policymaking in tourism can be characterised as ‘wicked’; problems are complex and potential solutions are affected by trade-offs and paradoxes.

The volume is divided into three parts.

The first part is conceptually focussed and presents the theoretical underpinnings of tourism policymaking in the context of contested wicked problems. In the opening chapter, Christof Pforr, Markus Pillmayer, Marion Joppe, Nicolai Scherle and Harald Pechlaner, trace the history of the academic debate on wicked problems to its beginnings 50 years ago. These apt reflections on the definition of ‘wickedness’ provide the foundation for subsequent empirical investigations of wicked policy challenges. In Chapter 2, Rachel Dodds and Richard Butler establish a second pillar on which this volume rests: sustainable tourism development. They skilfully highlight how tourism policymaking and sustainability interact in a truly wicked manner. Chapter 3 is written by one of the thought leaders in the political science discourse on wicked problems, Brian W. Head. It is a wonderful feature of this volume that such a foundational voice contributed with his sharp analysis. Among numerous noteworthy remarks, he reminds us that conflicting values and/or disagreement on what the problem is or whether a problem even exists sit at the core of many wicked problems.

The second part is the empirical main body of this volume and includes 23 chapters on wicked policy challenges in tourism: ranging from climate change to mega events, from Indigenous rights to the COVID-19 pandemic, from aviation to Airbnb, and from UNESCO World Heritage to tourism labour. These chapters delight by offering a broad international coverage through case studies from Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and Australia/Oceania. These core contributions reflect on policy and governance dynamics and how they interplay with tourism typologies, flows and issues. The empirical chapters often use multilevel and multidimensional lenses to interpret agency options and structural constraints for individuals, organisations and destinations. Addressing either the supply or the demand side of tourism, these chapters investigate wicked policy problems linked to tourist experiences, stakeholder engagement and citizens’ involvement in a wide range of tourist destinations, including vulnerable and transnational contexts. Issues of inequality, discrimination and neglect are presented to increase awareness and stimulate debate. Finding solutions to these issues is not straightforward. Nevertheless, and despite all the contradictions,

paradoxes and complexities inherent to wicked problems, these chapters attempt to identify effective policy approaches.

The last part presents reflections, discussions and conclusions emerging from the theoretical explorations and empirical investigations included in the core chapters of the volume. Harald Pechlaner and Julian Philipp dissect the interface between tourism and politics and present a new integrative tourism policy framework. Marion Joppe, Christian Laesser and Shaun Mann devise a decision framework for policy interventions. The five editors – Christof Pforr, Markus Pillmayer, Marion Joppe, Nicolai Scherle and Harald Pechlaner – conclude with a reflection on using the volume’s contributions to foster transformational processes for tourism, including adaptive political leadership that sees tourism as a suitable area to achieve an integration of governments’ social, cultural and ecological objectives.

This book is an important and overdue impulse to discuss the policy-making dynamics and the responsibilities around tackling some of the most pressing challenges in tourism, and beyond. We sometimes daydream of evidence-based decision-making. But without gaining a deeper understanding of what happens in the ‘policy-black box’ we will not be able to understand how and why we may or may not be able to solve some of the fundamental issues whose careful management is so critical to the wellbeing of present and future generations. In sum, this volume offers valuable insights into the underlying dimensions of wicked problems in tourism and, even more importantly, outlines opportunities to facilitate novel governance and policy approaches.

As the ACTHR Series Editors, we commend and thank the editors, Christof Pforr, Markus Pillmayer, Marion Joppe, Nicolai Scherle and Harald Pechlaner, for curating such a rich, diverse and relevant volume. We also congratulate all this volume’s chapter authors for their valuable contribution to this book series.

Michael Volgger, Curtin University, Australia
Serena Volo, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy

PREFACE

Governments around the world are faced with the challenge of managing a multitude of highly complex, uncertain and divergent, in other words, wicked problems. Sustainability, for instance, which is one of the themes that weaves through this book, constitutes such a wicked challenge. Necessitating the re-thinking of development to integrate environmental, economic and social goals, its principles have been firmly entrenched in many government policies; however, effective policy implementation has remained a distant reach, even after more than three decades of sustainability discourse. This exemplifies the inherent complexities and often paradoxical nature of wicked problems and the challenges they pose for contemporary policy-making systems that this book addresses.

Further, despite growing academic discourse on the political dimensions of tourism since the mid-1990s, literature on tourism as public policy is still scarce. An increasing focus on tourism policy issues by the political-administrative system as well as by the tourism industry demands, however, much greater scientific attention on the political nature of tourism development, especially studies devoted to its policy process. With our book, we contribute to this call for more academic discourse by offering a contemporary and interdisciplinary perspective on tourism public policy to aid the description, analysis and explanation of wicked and interconnected policy problems that confront many governments. Contemporary problem-solving capabilities and the ability of governments to address complex challenges are critically analysed. With contributions from international experts, the book covers a wide range of wicked tourism policy issues, including the climate emergency, tourism mobility, Indigenous disadvantage, the COVID-19 pandemic and the platform economy, showing first insights into transition pathways towards tourism sustainability.

The adopted wicked lens offers a suitable framework to steer our discourses throughout the volume and has yielded some interesting analytical insights. The presentation of case studies from regional and country-specific locations around the world is one of the great strengths of this text, making it relevant to academics, students as well as policymakers and practitioners alike.

We hope you enjoy our book and see it as an impetus to further progress research in this area.

Christof Pforr, Perth, Australia
Markus Pillmayer, Munich, Germany
Marion Joppe, Guelph, Canada
Nicolai Scherle, Munich, Germany
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November 2023

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INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 1

WICKED PROBLEMS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM POLICY-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

According to Head (2008), wicked problems are not just wicked problems in the sense of complex challenges, but situations that are confusing, unique, diffuse, without clear responsibilities or accountabilities, and difficult to resolve. These problems stand out for their uncertain nature, lack of clear solutions and possible irreversible consequences of attempted interventions. Recognising the pertinence of wicked problems in contemporary public policy discourse, this chapter aims to explore and better understand political decision-makers' handling of these issues, in a tourism-specific context. The discourse on wicked problems, in accordance with 10 characteristics outlined by Rittel and Webber (1973), remains relevant when examining policy responses to mega trends, such as indigenous disparities, sustainability, digital transformation and demographic change. Against this backdrop and positioned within current academic

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Sustainability Paradox, Climate Emergency and COVID-19

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discourse, this introductory chapter briefly foreshadows the volume's various contributions by academics from around the world who present a wide range of wicked problems in tourism from their respective perspectives and contexts.

Keywords: Wicked problems; tourism public policy; policy formulation; policy process; policy-making

1. 50 YEARS OF DISCOURSE ON WICKED PROBLEMS

When we encounter the term 'wicked problems', it immediately brings to mind intricate and complex challenges. We are also well aware, that there are a multitude of contemporary issues which currently confront societies and governments worldwide, that fit this 'wicked problem' description. In defining 'wicked problems', Head (2008, p. 103) points out that 'complexity is clearly a constituent feature of wickedness, but complexity itself is not enough to trigger a wicked problem (...). Likewise, mere disagreement among stakeholders does not make a problem wicked, but when serious disagreements are combined with complexity and uncertainty we have crossed a threshold'.

Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 160) in their seminal paper 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning', used the term 'wicked' in a meaning similar to that of 'malignant', 'vicious', 'tricky' or 'aggressive' and made a distinction between, more straightforward and in a technical sense 'tame' problems and those that are more complex and difficult to frame, which often constitute 'wicked' social challenges. They also outline 10 attributes that characterise such a wicked problem:

- Difficult to define;
- Essentially unique;
- Maybe a symptom of another problem;
- No stopping rule;
- Multiple explanations possible;
- No clear solution;
- Solutions not true or false, but good or bad;
- No immediate or ultimate test for solutions;
- Attempts to solutions may have irreversible effects;
- Planner (policymaker) has no right to be wrong (Rittel & Webber, 1973 in Peters, 2017, p. 388).

When we contemplate issues such as 'indigenous disparities', 'sustainability', 'digital transformation' or 'demographic shifts', to name just a few, it becomes evident that the discourse on wicked problems remains highly pertinent. With reference to Petersen (2022), Pechlaner and Philipp in their contribution (Chapter 17, Volume 17B) refer to these challenges as megatrends, which 'are complex dynamics of change that describe the development and change of the world and have impacts on society, science, economy, and politics' (p. 287).

As tourism is inherently intertwined with the broader economic and socio-political landscape, the sector also encounters significant challenges that stem, for instance, from its susceptibility to climate crisis, the transformative effects of the platform economy and challenges associated with overtourism.

The discourse about wicked problems and the challenges they bring for policy and decision-making has been cognisant since the 1970s and has brought into sharp relief the role and capacity of governments' dealings with such complex, diverse and inter-connected policy issues.

Observing the shift in the socio-political landscape in the United States during the 1960s, [Rittel and Webber \(1973\)](#) arrived at the conclusion that addressing increasingly complex social issues could not be achieved through a solely rational approach to policy and decision-making. Instead, they emphasised the necessity to incorporate into the political discourse diverse stakeholder perspectives as a pivotal pre-requisite for adequately framing contemporary policy problems. Essentially, the debate has been about how governments approach and frame these wicked problems, which highlights differences in the mode of governance. These can range from traditional hierarchical problem-solving by the political administrative machinery, guided by bureaucratic processes and evidence-informed policy approaches, to a more collaborative *modus operandi*, which tends to shift greater responsibility to the market and the individual, thus reflecting a more interconnected, value-driven policy approach to problem-solving.

Since then, but in particular, over the past three decades, the 'wicked' perspective has gained significant traction and has developed into a prominent element of mainstream policy discourse ([Crowley & Head, 2017](#); [Head, 2022](#)). Furthermore, scholars have endeavoured to condense Rittel and Webber's ten defining characteristics of wicked problems into a more concise set of attributes. As noted by [Head \(2008\)](#), in light of escalating complexities of not only problems but also possible solutions, alongside the challenge of adequately engaging an increasingly complex and disparate set of stakeholders, they are characterised by significant levels of complexity, uncertainty and divergence. Reflecting this complexity, [Alford and Head \(2017\)](#) in their conceptual model introduce 'degrees of wickedness', which can range on a continuum from 'tame' to 'very wicked' problems.

Further, it is interesting to note that while the application of the concept has not been uniform across various disciplines and research domains, it has nonetheless gained significant popularity within the realm of environmental management and, more recently, in discussions on the complexity of climate change (e.g. [Crowley & Head, 2017](#); [DeFries & Nagendra, 2017](#); [Head, 2014](#)).

In tourism research to date, the concept of wickedness is often omitted from comprehensive tourism policy studies and has rather been adopted as a buzzword, with only few studies empirically exploring wicked problems, for instance, in the context of tourism in national parks ([Shultis & Way, 2006](#)), coastal and marine development ([Dwyer & Gill, 2019](#)), climate change ([Hughes et al., 2013](#); [Weaver et al., 2022](#)), sustainable tourism ([Fodness, 2017](#)), Indigenous tourism ([Scherrer & Doohan, 2014](#)), tourism impacts of local communities ([Odeh, 2010](#)) and strategic human resource management ([Martin et al., 2011](#)).

By adopting a specific ‘wicked problem’ lens in this volume, we take aim at exposing new insights and contributing to a better understanding of governments’ efforts and failures in dealing with complex, uncertain and divergent policy problems (Head, 2008).

Although we acknowledge that there are varying degrees of ‘wickedness’ to problems (Alford & Head, 2017; Head, 2008), for the purpose of this book we restrain from being too prescriptive and adopt a broad understanding (as an analytical framework), which frames wicked problems as complex, diverse and interconnected social, economic and ecological issues.

With this approach, the book offers a contemporary perspective on tourism policy to aid the description, analysis and explanation of current wicked and interconnected policy problems that confront governments around the world and explores how these impact and are impacted by tourism.

Contemporary problem-solving capabilities and competencies of governments in addressing challenging problems in modern pluralistic industrial societies are critically analysed by focussing on policy responses to specific complex, diverse and interconnected social, economic and ecological issues, thus to wicked problems, such as the climate emergency, tourism mobility, overtourism, indigenous disadvantages and crisis events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the sharing economy or tourism sustainability.

The aim of the book is fourfold as it sets out to

- (1) define wicked problems in the context of tourism public policy;
- (2) better understand empirically different types of problems;
- (3) reflect on the policy and governance approaches adopted to address them;
- (4) discuss challenges to problem-solving through contemporary government and policy interventions.

With these objectives, the volume also responds to Brian W. Head’s (2008, p. 101) observation that ‘there has been surprisingly little attention in the research literature as to how wicked problems are identified, understood and managed by practitioners concerned with policy and management’.

A great variety of wicked problems in a variety of contexts is presented in this book while acknowledging that there is not a single best approach in dealing with them. Nevertheless, by collating different perspectives, we seek to understand, to learn to adapt our dealings with complex, diverse and inter-connected problems and to inform future policy approaches.

In order to capture and critically analyse a wide range of governance and policy responses, throughout this volume, many contributing authors have employed the framework of policy response strategies to wicked problems identified by Head (2022), namely (1) problem avoidance, (2) authoritative imposition, (3) micro-management, (4) science-based technocracy, (5) incremental ‘muddling through’, (6) collaborative dialogue and (7) long-term coping and prevention strategies.

2. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The two-volume book *Tourism Policy-making in the Context of Contested Wicked Problems* is organised in three parts. In Volume A (Sustainability Paradox, Climate Emergency and COVID-19), in the first part (Chapters 1–3), the book’s conceptual and theoretical discourse seeks to contribute to a better understanding of wicked problems as complex and contested contemporary policy problems and how governments have attempted to respond to these challenges.

Adopting the wicked problem perspective in a tourism setting, the second part focusses on international cases and research from a range of countries such as Italy, Austria, Australia, Finland, Chile, The Gambia, Germany, Argentina, Bulgaria, China, Azerbaijan, Ecuador, Brazil, South Africa and the Maldives and on a variety of complex policy problems which include mega events like the Olympic Games, climate change, citizen participation, Indigenous rights, migration, sustainable development, gender inequality, local governance, the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO World Heritage, anti-discrimination, the Airbnb phenomenon, employment issues in tourism and hospitality, labour informality, multi-level governance, aviation and broader mobility aspects.

In Volume B (Politics, Paradigm Shifts and Transformation Processes), the third part (Chapters 17–19) concludes the book by offering a synthesis of the theoretical and practical contributions and conclusions drawn from experiences around the world alongside the mapping out of priorities for future research.

In this opening chapter (‘Wicked Problems: Implications for Tourism Policy-making’), the editors of this volume, Christof Pforr, Markus Pillmayer, Marion Joppe, Nicolai Scherle and Harald Pechlaner introduce the reader to the ‘wicked’ theme, present the rationale for compiling this book and provide an overview of its scope and structure.

Chapter 2 by Rachel Dodds and Richard Butler (‘30 Years of Sustainable Tourism Policies: A Reflection on Success and Failure’) offers an important footing for this volume by reviewing the basic elements of sustainable tourism, its links with the parent concept of sustainable development and the issues involved in applying the ‘triple bottom line’ approach to tourism. The authors then examine the relationship between policy formulation and application in the context of governance and the links between governance and power at different levels. Here Dodds and Butler emphasise that without any doubt the development of effective and appropriate policies for sustainable tourism constitutes a ‘wicked problem’. The chapter includes discussions of case studies at different scales to illustrate the positive and negative results of the implementation of such policies and concludes with a general outlook on whether tourism sustainability can ever become a reality.

Against this backdrop, Brian W. Head in Chapter 3 (‘Managing Wicked Problems: Challenges for Sustainable Tourism’) provides an important underpinning to the book with his synopsis of the concept of wicked problems. With reference to the concept of sustainability in a tourism setting the author not only builds on Chapter 2 but also illustrates how a ‘wicked problem’ perspective can offer useful analytical insights into the nature of complex and contested issues and how governments attempt to address them. With reference to [Rittel and](#)

Webber's (1973) seminal paper 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning' published five decades ago, he insightfully traces not only the concept's origins in the 1970s but also its contemporary conceptualisation. In his understanding, wicked problems materialise 'when the stakeholders cannot agree about the nature of the problem, and when their conflicting perspectives are shaped by divergent values and priorities' (p. 31). However, this chapter is not only about how wicked problems are defined or framed by stakeholders but Head also sheds light on how governments respond to these challenges 'in terms of policies and regulations, principles and frameworks, and working with stakeholders' (p. 32).

The second part of the book (International Case Examples) discusses the wicked tourism problem of climate change, tourism mobility, the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism employment, multi-level governance, Indigenous tourism, migration, policy implementation, participation, platform economy, gender inequity and diversity management.

In Chapter 4 ('Winter Love: Climate Change Policies and Their Implementation in Austria'), Ulrike Pröbstl-Haider and Nina Mostegl point out that many Alpine destinations are still insufficiently prepared for the severe implications of climate change. Referring to climate change policies in Austria, the authors direct attention to the fact that the effects of climate change are no longer a distant, slow-paced, future phenomenon. They argue that despite an increase in climate change awareness, problem and policy framing (not only) in tourism remains difficult and complex. Against this background and using Austria as a case example, the chapter discusses instruments and pathways to deal with the specific wicked winter tourism problem of climate change, specifically how destinations in this region can meet this challenge through government and policy interventions.

A paradoxical setting for tourism development in Arctic Finland, especially Lapland, provides the backdrop for Jarkko Saarinen, C. Michael Hall and Siamak Seyfi's chapter contribution on 'The Governance of Climate Change and Tourism in Arctic Finland: Climate Change as a Super-wicked Problem for Tourism and Regional Development' (Chapter 5). The authors point on the one hand to the region's heavy reliance on international tourism growth, which is primarily based on aviation access to the region but at the same time also highlight Finland's ambitious national and legally binding climate mitigation targets with the objective to reach carbon neutrality by 2035. Thus, it comes as no surprise that in reference to Lazarus (2009, p. 1160) the authors see climate change as a 'super-wicked problem' for Arctic Finland. They argue that this dilemma requires careful consideration and innovative solutions in tourism governance and public policy-making to ensure that tourism can continue to contribute to the region's economic prosperity while also addressing the challenges of climate change.

Shifting attention specifically to the wicked problem of carbon emissions in tourism and related transportation, Eugenia Kgomotso Mereothle's chapter 'Problems Associated with Aviation Carbon Emissions and Carbon Footprint of Tourism in South Africa: Policy, Regulations and Governance Issues' (Chapter 6) dissects the South African aviation and tourism industries to document their carbon emissions and carbon footprint, respectively. Highly dependent on air connectivity to and within the country due to large distances and poor infrastructure,