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The Meaningful Tourism Paradigm in Africa and Asia: A Movement for Transformative Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the Special Kristel Kessler Focus topic on the Meaningful Tourism paradigm, analysing its application as a transformative movement across Africa and Asia. Framed by the need for holistic sustainability beyond quantitative growth, the paradigm mandates the alignment of six core stakeholders: visitors, communities, employees, businesses, government, and environment through objective benefits and subjective satisfaction, measured by SMART KPIs. Drawing on multi-case observations from Cameroon to Mongolia, the analysis reveals how this framework addresses entrenched challenges like economic leakage, cultural erosion, and environmental pressure. It positions Meaningful Tourism as a strategic tool enabling destinations to 'leapfrog' unsustainable practices, foster inclusive growth, and build resilience. The synthesis concludes that the paradigm's global adoption signifies a critical shift from a niche initiative to an essential movement for equitable and future-proof tourism.

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1. Introduction

In the last edition of the Bali Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Culture Research the founder and Executive Director of the Meaningful Tourism Centre published an introduction into the Meaningful Tourism paradigm (Arlt, 2025). In the current edition this is followed up with a Special Focus topic looking at the development of the Meaningful Tourism paradigm and its application especially in Africa and in Asia. Readers not familiar with the paradigm might have a look at the article in the June 2025 edition of BJHTCR. There are also a number of recorded online lectures available at the website of the Tourism Institute (<https://institutetourism.com/>)

Here it should be sufficient to point out that this holistic approach is based on the insight that a sustainable future of tourism in times of changes in technology, climate and customer demands is only possible if the interests of ALL stakeholders are aligned and objective benefits and subjective satisfaction is created for all of them.

To measure and management these benefits and satisfaction levels SMART KPI Key Performance Indicators are used, and if possible, connected to an AI-powered dashboard showing progress of all indicators in real-time.

This text is written at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, entering the new quarter with a lot of anxiety and uncertainty on a global scale. A positive approach is needed more than ever, as Meaningful Tourism is providing, based on Positive Psychology and Creative Destruction theory, embracing change instead of trying to bring back the “good old times” of the pre-pandemic focus on growth and quantity, with arrival numbers as the main KPI.

The openness to change is bigger in countries still catching up in their tourism development, as the examples from Africa and Asia provided in this Special Focus topic articles clearly show. The majority of the authors and indeed all editors are Certified Meaningful Tourism trainers, part of a community of more than 40 trainers located around the world, from Canada to South Korea and from Sweden to South Africa.

The year 2025 has seen big steps forward for the Meaningful Tourism paradigm. The community has grown, the paradigm and its practical application has been the topic of conferences, workshops, trainings and fairs online and in Spain, Germany, Turkiye, Dubai, Nepal, China and other countries. The Meaningful Tourism Weekly, the free publication of the Meaningful Tourism Centre has increased its readership considerably and Social Media posts of MTC found almost a million readers during the year.

A major achievement has also been the adaptation of the paradigm in the official vision statement of the PATA Pacific-Asia Travel Association, naming A Meaningful Pacific-Asia Tourism Economy as the vision for the future development of the region. We hope that the readers of the Special Focus topic articles will get new insights and ideas for their work as researchers, teachers, students or practitioners in tourism and hospitality.

We start the second quarter of the 21st century with moving from the Meaningful Tourism initiative to naming the process, based on the success and positive feedback from colleagues in academia and in the industry, now Meaningful Tourism movement.

Africa's tourism industry has demonstrated significant growth, leading the way in terms of international arrivals. This growth has been driven by improved air connectivity, relaxed visa regulations, and an increasing interest in discovering the oldest inhabited continent where humanity originated. However, despite this growth and increased visibility, Africa still faces challenges related to safety concerns or perception, governance, high transportation costs, and poor infrastructure. These challenges are compounded by a lack of coordinated planning and international cooperation, which results in a high percentage of lost and dispersed tourism revenue.

The development of the Meaningful Tourism Paradigm in Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, and Zimbabwe offers a transformative approach, as has been shown with different examples. This model emphasizes collaboration among stakeholders, community empowerment, and environmental stewardship through the use of SMART KPIs and practical tools for sustainable development and inclusive growth. In Cameroon, Meaningful Tourism is used to mitigate sustainability fatigue and shift focus toward culturally rich experiences, reinforcing community identity and environmental accountability within tourism narratives. Kenya highlights eco-tourism and its certification framework nationwide to expand sustainability principles and benefits, particularly in urban environments. However, their approach extends beyond tourism products to include skills development, gender inclusion, and social equity workshops, all aligned with global inclusion goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This vision is similarly embraced by South Africa and Zimbabwe, where Meaningful Tourism complements existing governmental strategies centred on capacity building, product innovation, and policy coherence through

collaboration and empowerment of stakeholders. Tanzania and Zanzibar are also investing in Meaningful Tourism as both a practice and a self-assessment tool to enhance their tourism offerings, embracing opportunities in eco-tourism, regenerative tourism, and halal tourism.

While these countries are at different stages of tourism development and offer different types of tourism products; they have all recognized Meaningful Tourism as a vital tool to advance beyond mere sustainability and provide authentic experiences that benefit all six stakeholders involved. By implementing the Meaningful Tourism Paradigm, these nations are effectively addressing existing challenges by boosting economic retention, enhancing community benefits, promoting environmental sustainability, and preserving tangible and intangible cultural resources. These destinations perceive the Meaningful Tourism Movement as a way to establish themselves as regional leaders in transformative and sustainable tourism, ensuring that every dollar spent results in measurable benefits for the environment, travellers, and local communities. This paradigm empowers African tourism destinations to transcend traditional safari experiences, embracing innovative tourism products that engage local communities and authenticity. By fostering fair partnerships and retaining revenue, it champions holistic sustainability focused on cultural preservation, capacity building, skills development, and digital tourism. Meaningful tourism serves as a powerful tool to confront challenges and achieve impactful results as they embrace the current digital tourism era.

Asia's rapid growth in international tourism, particularly the emergence of China as a dominant source market, highlights the necessity for more sustainable and inclusive tourism practices. As Asia's significance in global tourism continues to expand, there is an increasing need to transition toward a Meaningful Tourism paradigm focusing on authentic niche tourism products involving and benefiting all six stakeholders. This approach is especially relevant in countries and destinations such as Mongolia, Nepal, North and Northeast India, which were discussed in the article.

This shift ensures that tourism yields measurable benefits and subjective satisfaction for all parties involved aiming for holistic sustainability rather than merely imposing restrictions. Although these destinations face unique challenges, they have embraced the Meaningful Tourism Movement through various initiatives and unique product development offering transformative experiences and revenues, both in the short and long term. Mongolia's ambitious plan to boost visitor numbers and in-destination spending through nomadic tourism presents an opportunity for economic growth and local impact. The "Ger and Nature" concept in Mongolia, supported by the UN PAGE, aims to integrate local nomadic herder communities into tourism activities while promoting sustainability and cultural authenticity. In India, community-oriented tourism in the northern and northeastern states, alongside artisan-led tourism development, reflects a shift towards meaningful and inclusive tourism models. Similarly, Nepal's focus on sustainable tourism practices, despite challenges such as natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrates a commitment to creating positive and shared value for visitors, host communities, and the environment.

Overall, Mongolia, Nepal, North and Northeast India have identified the Meaningful Tourism Paradigm as a key tool aligning with national tourism policies, encouraging stakeholders' collaboration and offering authenticity. The paradigm emphasizes genuine experiences, cultural respect, and community empowerment while advocating for environmental sustainability and equitable benefits across all stakeholders. Adopting a Meaningful Tourism approach is essential for addressing the challenges faced by these countries, including insufficient benefits for local communities, cultural and ecological destruction. Meaningful Tourism is not a niche concept; it is a strategic necessity. Its

successful implementation in Asia can serve as a global inspiration for meaningful, equitable, and transformative tourism, demonstrating what is possible. By embracing the Meaningful Tourism Paradigm, these countries have the potential to inspire the global tourism community and illustrate how tourism can be both meaningful and transformative, leading to long-term resilience, inclusivity, and a positive impact for visitors, the host community, tourism employees, governments, tourism companies and the environment.

2. Conclusion

The special focus topic of this edition of the Bali Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Culture Research has concentrated on the development of the Meaningful Tourism paradigm and its application especially in Africa and in Asia.

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