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## The Meaningful Tourism Paradigm – A Tool for Sustainable Tourism Development in Times of Crises and Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

Confronted by converging crises – climate change, AI-driven disruption, and shifting traveler demands – traditional sustainable tourism models struggle with "sustainability fatigue," often emphasizing sacrifice over tangible gain. This article introduces the Meaningful Tourism (MT) paradigm as a transformative tool for resilient development. Grounded in Positive Psychology, MT ensures the objective benefits and subjective satisfaction of all six core stakeholders (Visitors, Host Community, Employees, Businesses, Governments, Environment) simultaneously. It rejects zero-sum trade-offs, instead fostering aligned stakeholder interests through achievable, annually measured SMART KPIs tracking transparent progress. By shifting focus from restriction to mutual flourishing and demonstrable outcomes, MT provides a practical, positive, and holistic framework for building sustainable tourism resilience in an era defined by challenges and the search for meaning.

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## 1. Introduction

Meaningful Tourism is a paradigm which provides tools for tool for sustainable tourism development in times of crises and challenges. Climate Change, technological developments centered on AI and the changes in customer demands all make it necessary for destinations, service provider and organisations to embrace creative destruction and to mitigate, adapt and renew their business models.

The Meaningful Tourism paradigm defines six main stakeholders in tourism and hospitality. All six need to receive objective benefits and subjective satisfaction from tourism and hospitality activities to support the sustainable development of destinations, companies and organisations. The six Stakeholders of Meaningful Tourism including: Visitors/Guests, Host Community, Tourism Employees (including tourism, hospitality, transport, retail, attractions), Tourism and Hospitality Service providing companies, Governments on different levels, Environment (Local and Global).

A major starting point for the Meaningful Tourism paradigm is the Positive psychology approach. Positive psychology focuses on the thriving and flourishing of humans and factors contributing to success, virtues, and happiness (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Spin-offs have developed in the form of Positive Tourism (Filep et al., 2017) and Positive Sustainability (Kühnen et al., 2022, Lichtenthaler, 2021). Meaningful Tourism offers a holistic approach which provides solutions to a number of shortcomings in the discussion about Sustainable Tourism, Responsible Tourism, Regenerative Tourism, Green-Growth

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Tourism, De-Growth Tourism, Steady-State Tourism, Circular Economy Tourism and other such approaches. (Fletcher et al., 2019, Sorensen & Grindsted, 2021).

Meaningful Tourism starts not from the question what to reduce, give up, forego or at least feel ashamed about in our tourism practices. It rather concentrates on forms of tourism which ensure benefits and satisfaction for all stakeholders involved. Additionally, meaningful Tourism does not consider the different stakeholders to be in competition with each other, with the need to “balance” their interests or to treat the interests of one of them as more important than those of the others. Stakeholders are neither competitors nor enemies, their interests do not have to be contradictory but can be aligned by using the right methods. Also, meaningful Tourism does not set goals many years in the future or based on wishful thinking. The development of SMART KPIs, naming Key Performance Indicators for each stakeholder group which can be measured annually and provide transparent ways to see if the goals for benefits and satisfaction have been reached and work on their further improvement.

Sustainable and responsible tourism in most cases provide negative proposals of what to stop doing and for what to pay more, without providing much benefits in return except a good consciousness. The endless discussions of “if only everybody would behave more civilized, if only earning money would not be the main purpose of tourism business”, etc. are all failing to describe what the stakeholders would get in return for behavioral changes. In other words, Meaningful Tourism can be a remedy for “sustainability fatigue”, as it is a positive holistic approach which concentrates on achievable and measurable progress and covers both physical reality and mental and emotional perception in times of increasing anxiety and a general search for Meaningfulness (Arlt, Chun, Duane 2025).

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. *The Need for a New Paradigm*

In May 2022, Kirchherr published a remarkable academic paper titled “Bullshit in the Sustainability and Transitions Literature: A Provocation”. He strongly criticizes the trend of what he calls very frankly “Scholarly Bullshit” being published in large numbers using buzzwords like Circular Economy and Sustainability to get high levels of citations regardless of the mediocre quality of the papers. He singles out the category of “Activist rants” as the worst of such contributions, as “these articles frequently remain experiential instead of turning theoretical and/or empirical; they attempt to build their legitimacy through general, feel-good claims instead of substantive arguments.” (Kirchherr, 2022). In practical application, economic development and cost-saving measures have been criticized to give more attention than local residents well-being and nature preservation (Sorensen & Grindsted, 2021), with better quality experiences of the tourists or the situation of the employees seldom given attention in both practical implication and academic discussions.

In 2015, 17 Sustainable Development Goals were defined by the United Nations. As a result a whole industry developed around the discussion, measurement and evaluation of the SDGs. Unfortunately, as Biermann et al. (2022) and the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 (UN, 2024) have shown, in practically all goals the situation has either not improved or even became worse. The latest report called Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals, published in May 2025, finds that the world is on track to meet or is making “moderate” progress on 35% of the 137 SDG targets while for 47% of the targets progress is insufficient, and 18% of the targets have actually regressed from the 2015 baseline. For ten years, government leaders and industry bosses have been hiding behind SDG flags in their offices, SDG buttons on their lapels and SDG logos on their glossy pamphlets, with little more than words to show.

The term Sustainability itself has not only been misused in the academic world, but has also become ubiquitous in the general discussion, often with the simple meaning of something existing for a longer period of time (Crane, 2013).

The term also has very different connotations in different languages. In English, sustainability is an active process of keeping something alive, Sustainability here is a situation which is favorable for the action of sustaining, with no explicit reference to time. The German term used for Sustainability - "Nachhaltigkeit", however, is based on the idea of a carefully crafted perfect system, which once in place, does not need any outside action anymore, originating in the 18th century. In French the temporal dimension is stressed: "Durabilité" concentrates on the fact that something can exist for a long time and is not easy to destroy.

The Chinese term Ke Chi Xu Xing (可持续性) has a complex meaning as it combines "possibility", "existence" and "not stopping over a long period of time" to a multi-dimensional term. Sometimes "Naiyong" (耐用) is used instead, which concentrates on durability.

However, in most cases discussions on sustainability are heavily biased towards a concentration on environmental questions. For example, the UNEP (2022) report with the title Transforming tourism in the Pan-European region for a resilient and sustainable post-COVID world solely concentrates on the environment despite the broader approach proclaimed in the title, similar to other publications (Conely, 2022, European Travel Commission, 2022).

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has accelerated the search for a new approach to global tourism and provided the opportunity to rethink tourism development.

The UNEP report similar to many other sources shows that demand for mainstream sustainable tourism is gaining momentum and that most travellers want to travel more sustainably in the future. However, many respondents complained that they did not perceive any changes in the reuse and recycling of materials, in waste management or increased energy efficiency in the tourism sector. (UNEP, 2022)

In fact, the need for a paradigm shift in global tourism, going beyond environmental questions, existed long before the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

The world developed economically at an ever-growing speed in the last thirty years without a parallel growth of political institutions managing globalisation – the climate catastrophe, the rise of despotism and the concentration of wealth in ever fewer hands can be seen as the result.

Global tourism spending even outpaced global GDP growth (UNWTO, 2021), but likewise no regulatory body emerged to define and enforce limits to the acquisition of public goods like beaches and city centers, to look after the "carrying capacity" of nature and host communities, to support the quality of the experience of both guests and hosts or to fight the elephant in the room of the tourism industry: seasonality and connected to that the dominance of low-pay and seasonal jobs.

The very success of international tourism, with five times the number of trips in 2019 compared to the year 1980 (COTRI ANALYTICS, 2022), made a mockery of the idea of hospitality and ran in many places a juggernaut over local nature, local culture, authenticity, diversity and serendipity, negatively impacting satisfaction levels of all stakeholders involved. Gigantic cruise ships, all-inclusive resorts, overcrowded beaches and disneyfied tourist cities are all examples of forms of tourism organisation which in effect prevent meaningful guest-host encounters and lead to price wars between providers of increasingly identical service offers.

In 2018 and 2019 already a debate under the headline of "Overtourism" developed as a result of growing resistance of host communities, signaling the need to change the structure of global tourism. Tourism started to change its image from being a provider of joy, jobs and peace to an image of being a force of destruction and pollution and a reason to develop "flight shame" (Chiambaretto et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, a plethora of discussions about the necessity of a "new" tourism, of adherence to SDGs, and of the need of the tourists to finally start to behave in a more sustainable and responsible way evolved (Bhuiyan et al., 2021, Persson-Fischer & Liu, 2021). The solutions discussed varied, but concentrated very often on reducing the number of trips and of visitors through regulations or increased prices.

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However, with international tourism restarting in 2022 and 2023, most discussions and pledges for a better “new normal” and a measurement of success beyond arrival numbers were quickly forgotten.

The necessity to rethink tourism is also based on the insight that tourism today goes beyond recreation. Only a minority of the people affluent enough to afford tourism, about one fifth of mankind with respect to international tourism and about two thirds of mankind with respect to domestic tourism (Arlt, 2022), travel to rest their limbs and muscles. Instead, travel is done for increasingly diverse and often mixed purposes including, for example, digital nomads, combining online work and travel, VFR, visiting the ever-growing group of friends and family living in different places, as well as business and MICE, which cannot be completely substituted by Zoom calls. Religion, culture, education, health, special interests, second homes and many more need to be added, creating a whole universe of unforced mobility motivations. The majority of people who can afford tourism, especially international tourism, spend their working time sitting in front of a computer or in meetings rather than sweating in a coal mine, a factory or on a field.

The wish to refresh the brain and the wish for self-actualisation and indeed transformation (Pine 2026) by new experiences and new inspirations as well as gaining social capital gained importance already before the CoViD-19 pandemic. Binkhorst & Den Dekker stated already in 2009 that tourists are driven by a growing desire to engage in spontaneous, self-expressed and self-determined tourism experiences.

In 2017, a collection of articles was published under the title of “Positive Tourism” (Filep et al., 2017). In the foreword, Philip L. Pearce points out that since the beginning of the 2000s, as positive psychology developed to augment the study of individual problems, deficits and difficulties by concentrating on how to achieve greater happiness and subjective well-being, tourism psychologists like himself and Mihaly Csikszentmihaly have been instrumental in using these approaches to understand if and how tourism can enhance the life experience of those involved in travel and tourism. The pandemic and the untimely death of Philip L. Pearce have slowed the work in this field. However, at the end of 2022, Singh, Butler and Fennell followed up with *Tourism as a Pathway to Hope and Happiness*.

The sudden realisation of the fragility of life and the possibility of a shattering of the perceived stability of personal circumstances regardless of personal wealth has resulted in a new enforcement of the criticism of shallow consumerism and 3B (Beach, Beer, Boredom), 3S (Sea, Sun, Sex, or in the Chinese variation: Sightseeing, Shopping, Selfies) tourism, further increasing the demand for Meaningful Tourism beyond simple recreation and sightseeing.

The post-pandemic situation has also highlighted the increased difficulties of finding and retaining well-qualified personnel. Low levels of payment, unsatisfactory working conditions, seasonal employment and limited career chances resulted in problems to find sufficient numbers of staff already before the pandemic. However, during the pandemic many employees were forced to look for other employment and found in many cases work with similar levels of payment but much less demanding in terms of working hours and better social standing (Kwok, 2021). Tourism Management university courses encounter greater difficulties to attract students worldwide.

In the debates about sustainability the employees in service providing companies and organisations are seldom part of the discussion. Meaningful Tourism acknowledges that employees of service providers in tourism, hospitality and transportation are stakeholders on the same level as the other stakeholders.

## ***2.2. Meaningful Tourism***

Since the very beginning of modern tourism in the middle of the 19th century, “tourists” has always been used as a term to distinguish between the free-willed travellers and the sheeplike tourist. The root of the stigmatization can be seen in the resentment of lower social classes catching up with those above them: According to D’Eramo (2021), the stages of the travellers growing contempt for the tourist correspond to the spread of leisure travel, from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie in the 19th century and from the

bourgeoisie to the proletariat in the 20th century. For the 21st century, one may add, the spread from Western travellers to non-Western travellers is the next step.

The term "Meaningful travel" has been used by different organizations in the form of volunteering vacations or as a part of a 'business to business digital training and resource tool (Bouskill & Corbeil, 2021). Airbnb declared in its annual report for 2021 that people will travel more meaningfully in 2021, defining it as travel that creates meaningful memories, time with loved ones and discovery and learning (Airbnb, 2021).

Several tour operators offer tours which allow travellers to visit destinations with the knowledge that in doing so, they are supporting local people and businesses in honest work, they are deeply immersing themselves in other cultures, and they are experiencing a destination meaningfully" (Gonzalez & Hubbard, 2022) or that help to get a "better and more meaningful connection to the people and land of this great country." (Mccreesh, 2022) Likewise a website called Conscioustravel.com promotes a tourism which "creates meaningful and sustainable livelihoods for those people and enterprises on which it depends". (Pollock, 2022)

With the exception of the last example, all the companies are carefully avoiding the term "tourism". The careful distinction between hating the deplorable tourist hordes while reveling in one's own travelling is however not working any more in the times of the climate catastrophe. "Some people now talk proudly of being 'flight-free' as they might about being vegan. An anti-travel movement is gaining momentum; in some circles, tales of far-off places have gone from badges of enlightenment to something like guilty secrets." (Robbins, 2021)

### ***2.3. The Way To The Meaningful Tourism Paradigm***

With the growth of domestic and especially international tourism after World War II, concerns about the economic, social and especially ecological consequences of mass tourism began to be discussed when Kaspar (1973) called for what he termed 'environmental ecology' as a new 'dimension of tourism debate'. A decade later, Krippendorf (1984), argued in his publication *Ferienmenschen* (Holiday People) for a new form of tourism that (re-)creates a harmony between nature and tourists.

The notion of sustainability was established by the 'Brundtland Report', Our Common Future (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). This report triggered the development which led to the 1992 UN conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro and the UN World summit on Sustainable Development 2002 in Johannesburg. It also started the career of the term "Sustainability", whereby Sustainable Development was defined as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (WCED 1987).

Of the five main criteria for sustainable tourism, which were introduced by Inskip (1991), namely the economic, environmental, and social responsibility as well as the responsibility towards visitors satisfaction and towards global justice and equity, only the first three aspects were taken up in the following extensive discussions, as the United Nations' organizations, including the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), supported a concept of sustainable tourism resting on the three environmental, socio-cultural and economic pillars only.

One result of the growing criticism of the negative effects of tourism, an enlarged concept of 'responsible tourism' was developed by Goodwin (2011) in his publication "Taking Responsibility for Tourism". Responsible Tourism recognises that Consumers, suppliers and governments all have responsibilities to address the impacts of mainstream tourism. Sustainability is still the goal, but a goal which can only be achieved by people taking responsibility.

Since the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, new concepts entered the discourse, especially Regenerative Tourism and Tourism as part of a Circular Economy (Sorensen & Grindsted, 2021), but none of these cover the interests of all stakeholders involved or are able to give practical advice how

stakeholders could be convinced to see an advantage in such radical changes beyond the lofty feeling of “gratitude in our hearts, for the blessing of being able to travel once more” (Tollman, 2022). Furthermore, in most of the discussions, tourism is implicitly concentrating to the discussion of leisure tourism of “holidays” and of rich Western travellers who are asked to reduce the number of trips after decades of travelling instead of newly entering the social strata affluent enough to visit other countries.

Half a century has passed since the publication of the Brundtland report and the start of the discussions about Sustainable Tourism. The period of the pandemic provided a radical example of how the world would look like without international tourism and an opportunity to move forward in the development of new concepts.

Meaningful Tourism as a new paradigm is a result of this experience, taking aboard all original five dimensions of sustainability, giving the aspects of global justice and equity more importance and introducing a more balanced and holistic set of criteria and Key Performance Indicators. The equal rights of guests and hosts are recognized but also the interests of employees working in tourism and hospitality service providers and of the companies themselves at a time when the shortage of staff and the negative economic effects of the pandemic are core issues. Not the least are also to be seen the interests and responsibilities of the governments on different levels and of the environment and by default the future generations.

The Meaningful Tourism paradigm reflects also the changed demand. According to UNEP (2022), the percentage of travellers stating that the pandemic has made them want to travel in a more sustainable way in the future than before has risen globally to 61%, with more than 80% answering affirmative in Vietnam, India, Colombia and China. The lowest levels with an increase of less than 40% are reported from source markets which had already before the pandemic higher levels of awareness, namely Israel, Germany and Netherlands.

As the rebound of tourism including overtourism in 2022 showed, it helps little to give schoolmasterly commands to tourists to put the interests of the host communities and the environment before their own interests. It also does not help to speculate how many percent increase in prices customer would agree to pay for a “greener” tourism product, or by how much the wages in the industry have to be increased to bring employees back, if the customers are not offered more than a better consciousness for their additional payment and the employees are not offered more than money to increase their job satisfaction.

In most of the many studies and strategy papers for the post-pandemic tourism development two elephants in the room continue to be ignored: The one-size-fits-all approach of offering standard products by many service providers and many destinations, which results in pronounced levels of seasonality, and connected to that the dominance of low-pay, low-recognition, no-career seasonal-only jobs resulting in the systemic difficulty to find and retain enough, let alone qualified, staff in all branches of the tourism and hospitality industry.

Tourism source markets and the demands and interests of market segments is more segmented than ever, 3S trips are replaced more and more by the search for experience and immersion, looking at buildings becomes replaced by meeting interesting people.

In a nutshell, the positive effects and benefits for all stakeholders involved, include:

1. for guests/visitors to enjoy tourism services creating satisfaction based on the benefits of products which are more precisely adapted to their specific demands, going beyond relaxation and sightseeing towards new experiences;
2. for host communities to benefit from instead of being encumbered by the encounters with visitors;
3. for the staff in tourism and hospitality service providing companies to benefit from better year-round working conditions, recognition as hosts instead of servants, full-time careers and meaningful work;
4. for service providing companies to have a sustainable perspective, year-round business, motivated staff, higher margins, and lower marketing costs thanks to online and offline recommendations by satisfied guests;

5. for governments to obtain employment opportunities for their citizens, enjoy increased tax income, generate a more evenly spatial and temporal distribution of tourism and friendly international relations;
6. for the environment and future generations the chance of mitigated environmental damage based on the feeling of embeddedness and belonging by all stakeholders.

Guests who are provided with exactly what they wanted, and even a bit of what they did not know they wanted, will turn into product ambassadors, offering free recommendation marketing instead of expensive and decreasingly efficient offline and social media marketing. Host communities will see the advantages of receiving visitors interesting to interact with, employees will value better pay and year-round jobs with the possibility to feel as hosts again instead of servants. Companies will be able to ask for higher prices against perceived better quality, will be able to use their resources year-round and will have less problems in retaining and training their staff. Governments will receive more taxes and will be able to use tourism as a regional development tool. With a feeling of belonging in the sense of a kinship economy, guests and hosts alike can be expected to treat the natural environment with more care.

Experience shows that putting up signs of "Verboten!" and *flygskam* campaigns will not change the behaviour of the majority of tourists. Doing something good for the environment alone will not convince guests to pay substantially more money for the same service. Travelling is, unlike elitist views making a comeback in the discourse during the pandemic, a human right, not a privilege, so pricing and/or taxing the bottom half out of the market is not an option either.

Distinguishable objective benefits and subjective satisfaction which are aligned to the needs of all stakeholders involved and which can be measured with SMART KPIs are necessary to transfer the Meaningful Tourism paradigm into practical action.

Meaningful Tourism is the tool for this practical action in many forms:

1. A tool to analyse and understand the situation of a destination / company
2. A tool to mitigate contradictions between stakeholders and align interests
3. A tool to develop a holistic sustainable development strategy
4. A tool to develop SMART KPIs to monitor progress
5. A tool to compare destinations / company in an Meaningful Tourism index
6. A tool to support integrate the Meaningful Tourism paradigm into academic and vocational education in the form of trainings, university programs, etc.
7. A tool to support public tourism discourse by providing transparent meaningful SMART KPI measurements

#### ***2.4. Meaningful Tourism History 2021-2025***

In 2021 the Meaningful Tourism Centre was established by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Georg Arlt, since 2022 the annual Meaningful Tourism Award has been celebrated, with ceremonies in Singapore 2022, Doha 2023 and Kathmandu 2024. Also, in 2022 chapters "Meaningful Tourism" by Prof. Arlt was published in Buhalis (ed): Encyclopedia of Tourism Management and Marketing, and in the following year in Morrison/Buhalis (eds): Routledge Handbook of Trends and Issues in Tourism. The Meaningful Tourism Centre published the Meaningful Tourism Index 2023, and the book Best Practice Examples for a Sustainable Tourism Future, both edited by Prof. Arlt. The same year saw also the start of the newsletter Meaningful Tourism Weekly. In 2024 the Meaningful Tourism Centre Ltd. was established as legal non-for-profit framework, with offices in London and Kathmandu. The Meaningful Tourism Transformational Game Workshop was developed, which is offered by more than 30 certified trainers around the globe.

Furthermore, an important milestone has been the unanimous approval by the Annual Summit of PATA Pacific Asia Travel Association of its new Vision Statement: Meaningful Pacific-Asia Tourism Economy in April 2025, followed a few weeks later by the Meaningful Tourism Forum at the GITF Guangzhou

International Travel Fair 2025 in China, which had the motto Meaningful Tourism – Enduring Connections. Meaningful Tourism has successfully become part of the sustainable tourism discourse and will help to mitigate the many challenges ahead for the tourism industry and indeed mankind.

This text is written at the end of May 2025. Every day the news present stories of broken records for heat, draught, rain, storms, of changing ocean currents and changing seasonal pattern with resulting loss of biodiversity and with insurance companies warning that they will not be able to cover any more the increased risk resulting from climate change. Tourism products depend on the physical environment, directly in water quality, temperatures, diversity of flora and fauna, predictability of sunshine and snowfall, of the blooming of cherry blossoms and tulips and many more.

Tourism products depend also indirectly on the social environment in the form of a functioning peaceful global economy providing disposable income for consumers to be spend on superfluous consumption like holidays away from home and visits of friends and relatives, festivals, doctors, universities and temples in far-away places. Increased risks of interruption and destruction enlarge the amount of necessary spending for resilience and for insurance.

Locals protesting the destructive influence of too many visitors on their area and their culture and employees voting with their feet to go and work somewhere else have been added in recent years. Meaningful Tourism is a tool which cannot solve these problems faced by all mankind, but Meaningful Tourism can develop strategies to bring tourism back to the side of the good guys, a place it occupied for decades successfully by aligning the benefits and satisfaction of all stakeholders.

### 3. Conclusion

Meaningful Tourism emerges not merely as another sustainability label, but as an essential paradigm shift for tourism's survival and relevance in an era defined by climate crisis, shifting demands, and post-pandemic realities. It directly addresses the critical limitations of previous approaches – their focus on sacrifice, vague future goals, fragmented stakeholder consideration, and lack of tangible incentives for behavioral change. By grounding itself in Positive Psychology and explicitly recognizing all six core stakeholders (Visitors, Host Community, Employees, Businesses, Governments, Environment), Meaningful Tourism moves beyond zero-sum trade-offs. Its core strength lies in demanding simultaneous objective benefits and subjective satisfaction for every group, demonstrably measured through SMART KPIs. This provides a concrete, positive alternative to "sustainability fatigue," replacing narratives of restriction with mutual flourishing.

The paradigm acknowledges tourism as a human right while tackling systemic industry flaws like seasonality and poor working conditions by aligning stakeholder interests through better value propositions – meaningful experiences for guests, dignified careers for staff, resilient businesses, tangible community benefits, effective governance, and environmental stewardship. Institutional adoption, like PATA's vision, underscores its practical relevance. Meaningful Tourism offers the actionable framework urgently needed to rebuild tourism as a resilient, equitable, and genuinely beneficial force for all stakeholders facing unprecedented global challenges.

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