



**WORKING PAPER SERIES:
Pursuing Sustainability in the Travel and Tourism Sector**

From a Triple to a Quadruple Bottom Line Sustainability: The Case for Adding 'Health & Well-being' to Sustainable Travel and Tourism

Purcell, W.M.¹ & Nikolova, M.²

¹Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, wpurcell@hsph.harvard.edu;

²BehaviorSmart & Central European University, milena@behavior-smart.com.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to the interconnected and hyper-dependent nature of health with the economy, equity and the environment. While lockdowns and social distancing strategies might have been a welcome respite for the environment, imposing human inactivity devastated livelihoods with under-served communities experiencing the worst hardships. Those in Travel & Tourism (T&T), service and retail sectors were particularly hard hit. To recover T&T and 'build back better', we posit placing health and well-being as a fourth pillar of sustainability, sitting alongside the pillars of economy, society and the environment. Healthy people, healthy planet and healthy prosperity for all – this is what sustainability means when we describe a world where no one is left behind¹. Embracing the wellbeing of people and planet as core strategic drivers of sustainability in T&T could help the sector pivot more powerfully from the pandemic's impact. Adopting sustainability as a driver of radical systems transformation² is core to sustainable development and could help T&T make a just transition to the 'next normal'. Here, we make the case for health and well-being as key to advancing sustainable T&T and explore what this might mean for the sector going forward.

Post-COVID-19 Consumer Culture

The Euromonitor International report³ on the top 10 global consumer trends for 2021, called out key directions relevant to T&T. Key among them is a middle-class reset and a move towards more conscious consumerism. While people are spending on fewer items, they are doing so with a renewed focus on values and intangible experiences – a move from having to being. A focus on health and well-being, with more spend on physical/mental health management and wellness, are increasingly top of mind among consumers who see their buying decisions as closely linked to sustainable living.

Even before the current global health crisis, political and business leaders recognized that healthy Gross Domestic Product (GDP) receipts alone should not be the sole metric of societal success⁴, with the World Happiness Report demonstrating the value of accounting for well-being⁵. Well-being is usually defined as having two dimensions: physical (related to health), and perceived (related to happiness). Indeed, global consumer research⁶ confirms a greater focus on health and well-being, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and sustainability as megatrends that will inevitably shape the future of society. The great re-set now underway offers a tremendous opportunity to define a new normalcy where health, well-being and happiness are drivers of progress. The global T&T sector is well placed to lean into these trends and emerge from the pandemic in a way that sets new norms for sustainable growth.

The Quadruple Bottom-line in Travel and Tourism

The T&T sector is a complex ecosystem that pre-COVID-19 accounted for some 10% of GDP. It is an ideal crucible in which to explore the interface of health with sustainability of people, planet and prosperity given the confluence of these domains in the sector. As T&T was all-but decimated by the pandemic, with forecasts⁷ suggesting that it may take a decade or more to recover fully, adopting sustainability in all its guises is a strategy to accelerating a return by 'building back better'.

The substantial benefits of T&T sit alongside its negative impacts on the environment, destinations and communities. As such, paying attention to health and well-being, alongside traditional triple-bottom line issues, could help advance the pursuit of sustainability in recovering T&T. Rather than market-based evolution, which optimizes commerce at the expense of people's health and that of the planet, the focus here reflects an ecology of T&T based on equity, community, and well-being.

In a world living with COVID-19 and concerned with human-nature interactions and equity, T&T will need to prioritize both the welfare of people and that of our planet to sustain prosperity. It would surely be impossible for any business in the sector to claim to be sustainable if it did not proactively seek to eliminate risks to the health and well-being of its consumers, its employees and workers in the supply chain, residents in the destinations in which it operates, as well as the ecosystems of the living world upon which it depends⁸. Similarly, destinations would only be able to describe themselves as "sustainable" if they market and manage T&T in a way that does not compromise the safety of local people and ecosystems. This will demand a fundamental readjustment of operations and business models to balance well-being impacts with profitability, and socio-cultural and environmental impacts. Therefore, we need to go beyond a triple bottom line model of sustainability, to one where health and well-being are positioned as a fourth pillar of sustainable T&T – the quadruple bottom line (Figure 1).

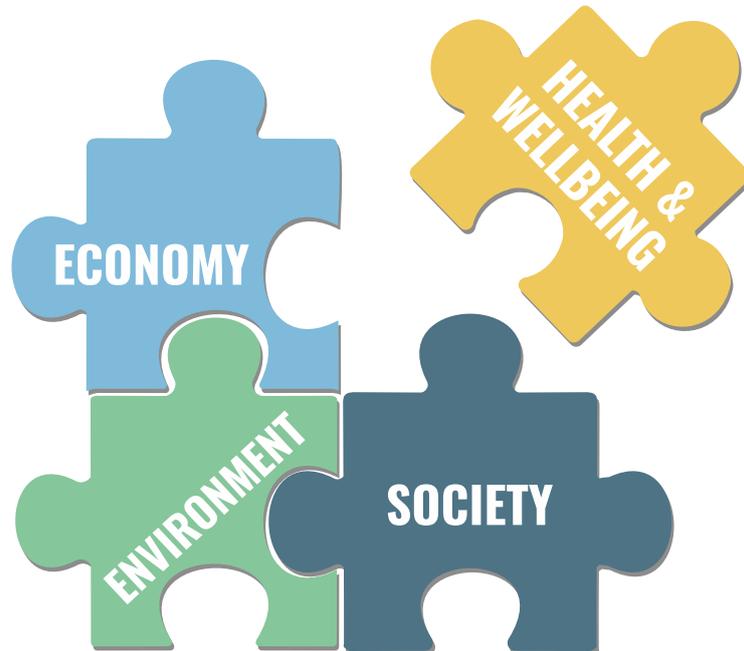


Figure 1: The quadruple bottom line - the new sustainability paradigm.

The COVID-19 crisis focused our concerns on both physical and mental health, bringing greater attention to the social determinants of health, health disparities and overall well-being. This offers a new context for T&T given the sector's focus on designing and delivering experiences that engender relaxation, rejuvenation and recovery alongside personal enrichment and self-actualization – all factors

with proven positive impacts on human health and happiness⁹. As global tourism destinations and travel service providers pursue recovery strategies, those T&T businesses that focus on health and well-being could serve to both differentiate their offer to appeal to the new post-COVID-19 pandemic traveler and advance their sustainability agenda.

Operationalizing the Quadruple Bottom-line in Travel and Tourism

So how might T&T operate in ways that activate desired human well-being effects? Research on the ingredients contributing to well-being reveal the factors that shape it reflect both the external environment of individuals and a set of internal personal factors¹⁰. Among the external determinants are income, work satisfaction, community, governance, religion and values. The internal forces that influence well-being are mental health, physical health, family, education, gender and age. Table 1 outlines four main ways that T&T destinations and businesses can influence some of the internal well-being factors and simultaneously contribute to increased physical health and an overall sense of happiness and mental well-being:

- 1) Incorporate nature and the outdoors in travel experiences – to impact on mental health and physical health.
- 2) Enhance contributors to physical health and welfare – to impact on physical health and well-being.
- 3) Encourage relationships and time with others – to impact on family and social relationships.
- 4) Stimulate personal growth and sense of achievement – to impact on happiness and self-actualization.

Table 1: Summary of Health & Well-being Enhancement Tactics for Travel & Tourism Operators

Action	Tactic	Example	Well-being Effects
Incorporate nature and the outdoors in travel experiences	Design itineraries and experiences around being outdoors and reconnecting with nature	Design and offer specialized holidays such as <i>Back-to-nature holiday package</i> or <i>Explore the great outdoors weekend</i> Offer appealing information and tools (maps) that make it easy for guests to decide to venture out even if it for a short walk	<i>Betterment of physical and mental well-being</i>
	Emphasize nature and the outdoors even when it is not the main focus of the itinerary	Include short walks in itinerary design Use interpretation techniques to make guests mindful of the natural environment at any given moment Share curious or interesting information about local nature	<i>Betterment of physical and mental well-being</i>
	Use the outdoors as a venue for activities	Create outdoor seating space for meals or a social area that is outside facing the nearby mountain or city park Plan group meetings, orientations and debriefs in outside areas	<i>Betterment of physical and mental well-being</i>

Emphasize contributors to physical health and welfare	Design and offer programs and experiences shaped around wellness, rejuvenation, and mindfulness	Design and offer wellness programs such as a <i>Rejuvenated You Weekend</i> or <i>A Forget-the-Stress Holiday</i>	<i>Positive effects on physical health</i>
	Emphasize healthy and feel-good options	Highlight particular health benefits of food, encourage physical mobility and mindfulness	<i>Positive effects on physical health</i>
Encourage relationships and togetherness	Frame itineraries and experiences around togetherness and time for family/ friends	Design and offer holidays such as a <i>7-day family journey through Italy</i> Feature experiences around spending time with close ones such as an <i>Outdoors picnic to share with friends</i>	<i>Activated relationship effects</i>
	Adjust itineraries and service designs to incorporate time for togetherness and mindful interactions	Devote an hour before dinner to reflect on the day at a device-free terrace Include in itineraries dedicated time for chatting with friends at sunset	<i>Activated relationship effects</i>
	Use interpretation, gamification and nudges to encourage joint activities, experiences and fun	Challenge travel companions to explore and discover natural surroundings together Set up a traditional cooking competition for families	<i>Activated relationship effects</i>
	Put in soft barriers for technology use to create space for one-on-one interactions	Declare the outside garden a cell-phone free space or create areas for cell 'phone conversations Include technology-free activities (e.g., a technology-free walk through the forest)	<i>Activated relationship effects</i>
Focus on personal growth and sense of achievement	Design itineraries to include activities that involve learning and new experiences	Incorporate opportunities for guests to learn local dance steps, greetings in a local language or a traditional local craft	<i>Increased sense of self-actualization</i>
	Incorporate opportunities for (manageable) challenges and achievements	Plan an extended hike that ends with a stunning viewing point	<i>Increased sense of self-actualization</i>
	Celebrate achievements and growth activities (badge, memory or video)	Train guides to use videos or photos to capture a moment of achievement Design special badges to celebrate achievements	<i>Increased sense of self-actualization</i>

1) *Incorporate nature and the outdoors in travel experiences*

Contact with nature, whether as a destination for recreation and sports, a stage for social interactions, or a backdrop for reflection and learning, affects health via multiple pathways. Outdoors spaces promote physical activity, which helps reduce heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and hypertension, among other ailments¹¹. Being physically active in a natural environment has proven benefits for one's mental health as well¹². Indeed, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

promotes physical activity outdoors in nature via medical prescriptions – the broad “Nature Rx” campaign includes national parks programs, e.g. Park Rx America, Outdoors Rx. Exposure to nature has also been scientifically linked to greater attentiveness, creativity, cognition, generosity, sociability, empathy and self-esteem¹³.

T&T destinations and service providers can influence the physical and mental well-being of travelers by placing a stronger emphasis on the natural environment and the outdoors. This is already happening in industry segments such as adventure travel where physical activity and interaction with natural environments are elements of the core offering. Nature and the outdoors could easily be made more prominent in the other T&T segments too. For example, service providers can help travelers become more mindful of their surroundings in nature and outdoor spaces to encourage appreciation and exploration. Placing interesting visual information in a hotel lobby about unusual plant species in the nearby city park can encourage guests to take a walk. Incorporating a short break outdoors en route to a cultural attraction by bus can be both refreshing and rejuvenating. T&T service providers can be more creative in using outdoor spaces as venues for experiences or activities, e.g., setting up outdoor seating, viewing points, terraces, etc. Meals, group orientations, debriefs or rests can all be designed to take place outside to enhance the overall quality of the experience and facilitate links with the natural environment. As these examples show, even small adjustments to standard itineraries can help make nature and the outdoors more prominent across all travel experiences and ensure that more travelers interact with their natural surroundings and benefit from its rejuvenating powers as part of leisure holidays or business travels.

2) *Emphasize contributors to physical health*

As more travelers emerge from the pandemic crisis with a renewed sensitivity concerning their physical and mental health and well-being, T&T operators can respond by designing and offering more programs and experiences shaped around wellness, rejuvenation and mindfulness. Holidays that integrate carefully curated food menus, physical and spiritual activities, along with relevant supporting services to elevate the health and wellness of guests can have tremendous effects on everyday well-being culture.

Many destinations and travel businesses have done an outstanding job in making food a prominent element of the experience they offer and a vehicle for engaging guests with local culture. Nevertheless, food and food ingredients in travel experiences can also bring important health benefits. What if more tourism businesses promoted the health benefits of local food and drink, in addition to their taste or cultural perspective? For example, guests served a local bread could be briefed on the local grains used and their health benefits. Alternatively, they might be encouraged to try a particular kind of food with their breakfast known to boost health.

In addition to emphasizing more prominently the health benefits of food and drink during trips, T&T service providers and operators can make small changes to encourage guests to engage in light physical activity while enjoying their holiday. Hotels can share with their guests suggested routes for short walks on a free afternoon and can nudge them to explore particular places of interest. Similarly, guides could purposefully plan itineraries to include short walks.

Mindful inclusion of elements known to have positive health effects on people can be accompanied by more proactive awareness raising on the principles of healthy living. T&T providers can offer healthier food options, communicating the health benefits of certain foods and drink as part of their interpretation. They can increase light physical activity across itineraries but also highlight the value of being physical active on regular basis. Small changes like this taken by the majority of operators in T&T can produce significant cumulative health benefits.

3) *Encourage social relationships and time spent with others*

Relationships and friendships are among the most important ingredients of life satisfaction and perceived well-being¹⁴. Leisure travel offers a wealth of opportunities for such shared experiences and the enhancement of personal relationships. The contemporary culture of multi-tasking, even during holidays, and the invasion of technology increasingly limit opportunities for personal interactions. With mindful attention on human-to-human encounters, T&T service providers can activate happiness-inducing activities.

A few easy steps can be especially effective. For example, travel service providers can be more intentional about the togetherness effects that leisure offerings create by framing entire itineraries (e.g., “A 7-day family journey through Italy”) or individual experiences around spending time with family and friends (e.g., “An outdoors picnic to share with friends”). Any itinerary can be adjusted to incorporate brief moments of togetherness and mindful interactions. An hour before dinner to reflect on the day at a device-free terrace or a dedicated time for chatting with friends over a sunset are easy ways to nudge travelers to leave their cell ‘phones behind and enjoy some small talk with close ones or with new people they have met on the trip. Through targeted interpretation and gamification techniques, families and friends can be nudged to engage in joint activities, experiences and fun. For example, a guide can challenge travel companions to try to be the first to spot a particular plant or bird species during a hike, or a hotel can set up a cooking challenge to engage families to compete in preparing a traditional meal. T&T service providers can also consider incorporating soft barriers for technology use to create space for unfiltered one-on-one interactions, e.g., creating device-free social spaces, or including device-free activities in the itinerary.

4) *Personal growth and sense of achievement*

T&T offerings are natural sources of new experiences and learning that support personal growth and achievement. These can be amplified through targeted experience design and facilitation tactics. Itineraries can be designed to include activities that involve learning and produce a sense of self-actualization. For example, while enjoying a demonstration of traditional local dancing guests can be engaged in learning one of the more complicated dance steps or master a local greeting with native pronunciation. Even small acts of learning something new and overcoming a small challenge can produce sense of personal achievement and self-satisfaction.

Another tactic here is the intentional creation of opportunities to experience manageable challenges, with the accompanying sense of achievement in overcoming them. Obviously, the design of the challenges featured in any itinerary need to be calibrated against the relevant physical and other capabilities or previous experience of the travelers. An example could be a hike that is slightly longer or involves overcoming higher altitude for a group of active travelers, or a farmers’ market challenge to identify unusual local fruits for travelers that are more sedentary.

An important element of achievement is celebration. For learning and personal growth to matter, they need to be recognized and celebrated. T&T service providers and workers can offer ways to celebrate such achievements. This might mean a guide trained to take a photograph or video capturing the precious moment of reaching the top of the mountain and the view that comes as a reward after a demanding two-hour hike. Alternatively, it might mean a tour operator offering small badges to reward those guests able to identify rare fruits at a local market.

These simple illustrations of the changes that T&T operators can make to enhance the physical and perceived well-being effects of travel experiences demonstrate a real opportunity for the sector. As

well-being is becoming increasingly important for societies and individuals, tourism can contribute to an accelerated shift in this direction.

The Role of Destinations

While most of the examples discussed relate to T&T operators and service providers, there is an important role for destinations. Destinations that recognize the importance of health and well-being and the need to add it as a fourth pillar to their sustainability strategies can take a series of steps in support. However, in order to respond to the new demand and make well-being a non-negotiable element of the traveler experience, local service providers need new knowledge and skills. Targeted training efforts can help nurture the needed preparedness and equip local companies with the tools they need to enhance well-being effects and stand out in the new market realities. As such, destinations can invest in capacity building efforts to help entrepreneurs and professionals in the local T&T industry advance their practice.

Destination authorities can plan and invest in visitor infrastructure that supports the needs for enhancement of local product portfolios. While some adjustments to itineraries and experiences require only operational modifications, others are possible only if specific leisure infrastructure is available. Mobility solutions or the lack thereof can impact on whether local operators can incorporate short walks or bike rides in their itineraries to move from one attraction to another. Green areas and natural recreational spaces might need enhancements to support increased demand for outdoor activities among destination guests and residents.

Destinations can make well-being a key element of their marketing efforts. As the pandemic transforms attitudes towards well-being among all audiences, more and more travelers will be attracted to destinations that promote physical health and perceived well-being. If local operators are prepared to offer experiences with mindful emphasis on health and well-being, then promotional efforts can extend this promise to future visitors.

Conclusions

Adopting a quadruple bottom line approach to sustainability would mean that T&T businesses and destinations would more overtly align their operational and business models with the need to balance economic benefits with socio-cultural, environmental and well-being impacts. For example, a tour operator would design an itinerary that is profitable, generates maximum positive impact for the local economy, minimizes or attenuates materially any negative impacts, is in harmony with the local cultures and community lifestyles, causes no degradation of the natural environment, does not put anyone (travelers, staff, local residents) at health risk and leaves the traveler satisfied and happier. Similarly, an accommodation provider would offer an experience that is economically beneficial and reliant on local suppliers to maximize economic and social impacts, does not cause any unnecessary negative impacts on the natural environment and uses natural resources optimally, and ensures that staff and clients are safe, and offered nourishing food along with opportunities for physical activity.

T&T has both the opportunity and capacity to become more sustainable as a sector by advancing health and well-being as a strategic driver. As the post-pandemic marketplace accommodates new health and safety measures, destinations and businesses are already adjusting their services and operations. Embracing this post-COVID-19 shift towards well-being, happiness and conscious consumerism, can help T&T build back better. As the COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed the links of people, planet and prosperity, it makes sense to adjust the T&T sustainability models to adopt the proposed quadruple bottom line of sustainability. This would mean that T&T destinations and companies would seek to maximize the value the sector generates by considering health alongside the economy, society and the environment to secure positive financial, societal and planetary impacts while advancing well-being.

THE NEW SUSTAINABILITY

(from a triple to a quadruple bottom line)

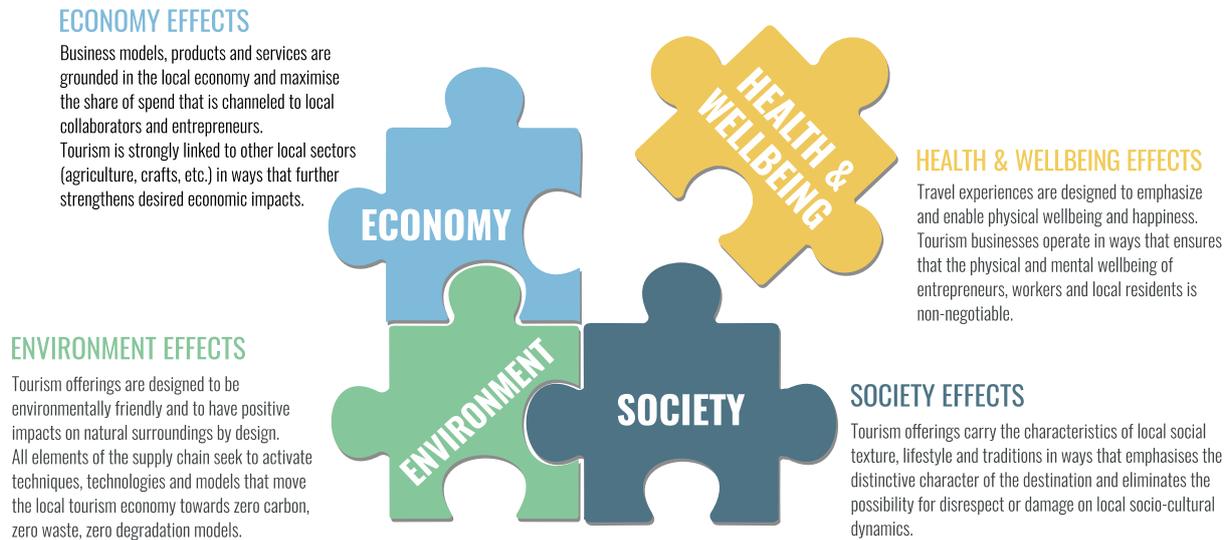


Figure 2: Operationalizing the quadruple bottom line in Travel & Tourism.

Endnotes

- ¹ United Nations General Assembly (2015). <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57b6e3e44.html>
- ² WBCSD (2021). <https://www.wbcsd.org/Overview/About-us/Vision-2050-Time-to-Transform/News/Unlocking-systems-transformation-A-business-view#:~:text=The%20term%20%E2%80%9Csystems%20transformation%E2%80%9D%20is,needed%20to%20achieve%20sustainable%20development.&text=However%2C%20despite%20the%20continued%20popularization,with%20varying%20levels%20of%20ambition>
- ³ Euromonitor International (2021). <https://www.euromonitor.com/megatrends>
- ⁴ World Economic Forum (2021). <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/05/gdp-new-measure-economic-growth/>
- ⁵ World Happiness Report. <https://worldhappiness.report/>
- ⁶ Euromonitor (2021). <https://go.euromonitor.com/white-paper-EC-2021-Top-10-Global-Consumer-Trends.html>
- ⁷ McKinsey & Company (2020). <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/travel-logistics-and-transport-infrastructure/our-insights/hospitality-and-covid-19-how-long-until-no-vacancy-for-us-hotels>.
- ⁸ Quelch, J. A. & Boudreau, E. C. (2016). *Building a Culture of Health: A New Imperative for Business*. Basel: Springer International Publishing AG.
- ⁹ Clark, A.E., Layard, R. and Senik, C., 2012. The causes of happiness and misery (No. halshs-00846583). World Happiness Report 2012. https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2012/World_Happiness_Report_2012.pdf
- ¹⁰ Helliwell, J.F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. & De Neve, J.E. (2020). World Happiness Report. https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/hw_happiness/1/
- ¹¹ Frumkin, H., Bratman, G.N., Breslow, S.J., Cochran, B., Kahn Jr., P.H., Lawler, J.J., Levin, P.S., Tandon, P.S., Varanasi, U., Wolf, K.L. & Wood, S.A. (2017). Nature contact and human health> A research agenda. *Environ. Health Perspect.*, 125(7): 075001. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28796634/>
- ¹² Mutz, M., & Müller, J. (2016). Mental health benefits of outdoor adventures: Results from two pilot studies. *Journal of Adolescence*, 49, 105-114.
- ¹³ Fong, K.C., Hart, J.E. & James, P. (2018). A review of epidemiological studies on greenness and health: Updates literature through 2017. *Curr. Envir. Health Rpt.*, 5, 77-87. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40572-018-0179-y>
- ¹⁴ The Harvard Study of Adult Development. <https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org/>