Everyday climate discourses and sustainable tourism

ABSTRACT

Debates surrounding the human impact on climate change have, in recent years, proliferated in political, academic, and public rhetoric. Such debates have also played out in the context of tourism research (e.g. extent to which anthropogenic climate change exists; public understanding in relation to climate change and tourism). Taking these debates as its point of departure, whilst also adopting a post-structuralist position, this paper offers a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of comments to an online BBC news article concerning climate change. Our analysis finds three key ways responsibility is mitigated through climate change talk: scepticism towards the scientific evidence surrounding climate change; placing responsibility on the ‘distant other’ through a nationalistic discourse; and presenting CO2 as ‘plant food’. The implications of these ways of thinking about climate change are discussed with a focus on how this translates into action related to the sustainability of tourism behaviours. In doing so, it concludes that a deeper understanding of everyday climate talk is essential if the tourism sector is to move towards more sustainable forms of consumption.

Keywords: Climate Change; Public Understanding; Foucauldian Discourse Analysis; Post-structuralism; Environmental inaction

INTRODUCTION

The direct contributions of tourism and touristic activity to climate change, have been identified by a range of key industry representatives. As early as 1999, the WWF published a report on climate change and its impacts on tourism (Viner & Agnew,
Identifying the fragility and direct vulnerability of the social and economic infrastructures supporting many tourist destinations, the report recognised tourism as an ‘essential part of our lives’ (Viner & Agnew, 1999, p. 7), yet it gave stark warning that “the likely effects are shown to be extremely wide-ranging and may have far-reaching implications for many tourist resorts” (Viner & Agnew, 1999, p. 46). Attention to climate change has intensified over the subsequent years with organisations such as the UNWTO hosting several conferences and publishing numerous reports in this area; the milestone being the agreement of the Davos Declaration (Scott et al., 2008; UNWTO, 2007). This declaration found genesis in a conference with over 450 participants from over 80 countries and 22 international organisations, thus reflecting the ever-growing awareness of, and commitment to, addressing climate change in tourism.

The UNWTO organisational commitment is reflected in the announcement of an on-going pledge to developing a coherent strategic response to the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon’s, call for action on Climate to be taken in greater coordination with global action on poverty alleviation and the Millennium Development Goals. The UNWTO announced that “[t]he Davos Declaration is our commitment that Tourism will be at the leading edge of the global response to climate change” (UNWTO, 2015). Indeed, this area was a major aspect of the UNWTO’s submission to the Bali Climate Summit.

Such recognition of the reality of climate change and the impact it has on tourism and the subsequent commitment to tackling this agenda is evident across the industry with key players such as the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) highlighting
climate change as a sub-category within its Tourism for Tomorrow Awards. Likewise, intersectoral partnerships have developed with organisations such as the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). Indeed, it is the comments arising as a result of the publications of the findings of a study by the WMO that provide the data for this paper.

Within academia, attention to climate change and tourism has also increased significantly in the last decade (c.f. Scott, 2011; Weaver, 2011). For example, tourism scholars have been amassing a range of evidence regarding the impacts of air transport in relation to climate change and tourism, with the consensus finding that the tourism industry represents a major contributor to anthropogenic climate change (Cohen, Higham, & Cavaliere, 2011; Gössling, Bredberg, Randow, Sandström, & Svensson, 2006; Gössling et al., 2007; Gössling & Peeters, 2007; Hall, Scott, & Gössling, 2013). In addition, research in sustainable tourism has focused on profiling the attitudes, beliefs, and traits of the ‘sustainable tourist’ (e.g. Budeanu, 2007; Passafaro et al., 2015), and exploring the role of stakeholders in managing sustainable forms of tourism (e.g. Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013).

Other leading figures in the field have explored the degree of public understanding in relation to climate change and tourism (Becken, 2007; Gössling et al., 2007; Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010); and public understandings of, and responses to, carbon offsetting schemes (Becken, 2004; Mair, 2011). Furthermore, findings by Miller et al. (2010); Böhler, Grischkat, Haustein, and Hunecke (2006); Barr, Shaw, Coles, and Prillwitz (2010); and Cohen, Higham, and Reis (2013), highlight the discrepancy between everyday behaviours and those exhibited in decision-making
practices within tourism purchases. This body of research serves to highlight the persistent lack of engagement by the general public to issues surrounding sustainability and climate change within the context of tourism. Rather, it is principally governments and, to a lesser extent, industry that are consistently identified by consumers as the parties responsible for addressing the impacts generated by tourism within the context of sustainability and climate change (Miller et al, 2010). Such relative absolution of responsibility to tourists, as consumers, is reinforced as the principle motivations underpinning tourists’ decision-making remain primarily focused upon traditional push/pull factors; principally satisfying personal and family needs with little or no consideration for the environmental impact of their actions (Miller et al., 2010). Thus, little attention has been paid to how lay knowledge and understandings of climate change and tourism come into existence and subsequently intersect; particularly, in terms of the use of scepticism and denial strategies.

In order to address this gap, we draw on recent suggestions that attempting to move towards a more ‘sustainable future’ requires, in part at least, a focus on the broader sociological and discursive issues positioning individuals within debates around climate change that exist within wider society (e.g. Hobson & Niemeyer, 2013). This approach, we suggest, is crucial in understanding how and why environmental inaction is still rife within the field of tourism. As such, this paper explores the ways in which the construction of popular discourse surrounding climate change in everyday life can help tourism researchers to explore some of the broader sociological issues that position, enable, and constrain notions of sustainability in relation to tourism. Lastly, in analysing such discourses, the article seeks to expose the ways in which broader
climate change talk functions to present a situation in which the individual is far from compelled to act, if not ‘irrational’ if they do act.

The paper does this by locating its theoretical position within post-structuralism. A rationale and methodology is then offered to highlight the usefulness of looking to broader data (e.g. data not directly focused on tourism) for tourism research. Findings are then presented as three distinct, though interlinked, ‘ways of talking’ about the environment, behaviour, and ultimately, responsibility. Finally, the paper explores the ways in which the findings can enhance understanding of environmental action/inaction and responsibility in the context of national and international tourism practices. First however, attention now turns to research exploring broader public framings of climate change in order to provide a basis for understanding their implications within tourism practices.

PUBLIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM

There is an overwhelming consensus on [anthropogenic climate change] the evidence among scientists yet there are also vocal commentators who reject this consensus, convincing many of the public, and often the media too, that the consensus is not based on ‘sound science’ or denying that there is a consensus by exhibiting individual dissenting voices as the ultimate authorities on the topic in question (Diethelm & McKee, 2009, p. 2)

Over the past fifty years, concerns surrounding the impact of humans on the environment have been increasingly voiced (e.g. Carson, 1962; Spretnak & Capra,
Politically, such concerns have been raised on a number of occasions including WCED (1987), UNCED (1992), WSSD (2002), Rio+20 (2012) and annual climate change congress meetings (IPCC, 2014), the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development (Goal number 13 on Climate Action), as well as the most recent landmark Paris Agreement talks, COP21 that are taking place at the time of writing. Such political interest is a direct result of the mounting scientific evidence documenting environmental changes. For example, as the IPCC (2013, p. 5) report clearly states “Each of the last three decades has been successively warmer at the Earth’s surface than any preceding decade since 1850”. In addition, there is now 10 times more carbonic acid in our seas than previously predicted (Wootton, Pfister, & Forester, 2008), resulting in widespread degradation of tropical coral reefs (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2007). Furthermore, with 13 million hectares of woodland and forest destroyed or lost each year (FAO, 2010), it is argued that over half of the world’s original woodland and forest has now been removed (Laurance, 2010).

However, as the opening quote to this section clearly suggests, whilst a consensus can be found in the scientific community regarding anthropogenic climate change, such a consensus appears much harder to establish in the public domain, whilst human impact on the environment is still increasing (FAO, 2010; Freudenburg & Muselli, 2013; Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2007; IPCC, 2013; Laurance, 2010; Wootton et al., 2008). Indeed, coinciding with an economic downturn and other socio-political factors such as: poverty, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, water and food scarcity, unequal access to education, to name but a few (WEF, 2015), posing ever-greater risk to the global population, it appears that public scepticism regarding climate change remains present in many cultural domains across the world. Such scepticism is pervasive in
western nations (Capstick, Whitmarsh, Poortinga, Pidgeon, & Upham, 2015; Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Smith, & Dawson, 2013). For example, in a study conducted in Britain, Poortinga, Spence, Whitmarsh, Capstick, and Pidgeon (2011, p. 1019) find that “public belief in climate change has dropped significantly from 91% in 2005 to 78% in 2010, and that the group of individuals who express skeptical views, i.e. who do not believe that the world’s climate is changing, has grown from 4% in 2005 to 15% in 2010”.

Whilst we could hypothesise on a range of different explanations for the apparent fluctuation in public attitudes, one debate appears to take precedent across a range of domains: that is, the ‘science’ supporting evidence for the existence of climate change. Such debate surrounds the ‘science’ behind climate change modelling, the exact effect of CO₂ emissions on the environment, and the extent to which ‘warming’ and ‘cooling’ are potentially natural processes – all evidenced in the ‘climategate’ scandal (Leiserowitz et al., 2013; Maibach et al., 2012). Although there is not an exact agreement on the extent to which CO₂ and other anthropogenic greenhouse gases impact climate change, there is consensus amongst the vast majority of scientists that the two are related and humans are the central cause (e.g. IPCC, 2013).

Such disparity between scientific evidence and public understanding has become the focus of a number of research projects. For example, McCright and Dunlap (2000) explored the role played by the US conservative movement in climate change scepticism to conclude that there were significant links between the conservative movement and climate change scepticism. Hobson and Niemeyer (2013) explore the extent to which climate sceptics have an ‘entrenched’ sense of scepticism or hold such
beliefs more loosely. Through their Q-methods research in Australia they offer the rather bleak conclusion that “…if 2 hours seeing (at times quite challenging) climate scenarios for your local region, and then 3 days spent deliberating cannot dispel the myriad of forms of climate scepticism, what will?” (p408). More recently, Capstick et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review on research exploring the temporal nature of climate change opinions to argue that growing public scepticism since the mid 2000’s can be linked to economic and sociopolitical factors. However, Diethelm and McKee (2009) argue that whilst research measuring and exploring public opinion is important, there is a need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which scepticism ‘tactics’ are employed and mobilised.

Bringing such debates within the specific context of tourism, many readers of this journal and Tourism Management will have witnessed the recent discussion on the extent to which anthropogenic climate change exists and the role of the tourism industry as a cause for such impacts (Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2014a, 2014b; Shani & Arad, 2014, 2015). The nature of this debate could be seen as being largely a representation of broader public understandings and debates surrounding climate change circulating in contemporary society. Indeed, part of the debate could be seen as highlighting the possibility that Hobson and Niemeyer (2013) note of an ‘entrenched’ form of denial, which might actually exist among a small number of tourism academics.

Therefore, as Koteyko, Jaspal, and Nerlich (2013, p. 84) call for research to focus on banal instances of scepticism functioning through ‘lay discourses’, in particular ‘internet-based discourses’, we would suggest this concern be extended to tourism research. In addition, Hanson-Easy, Williams, Hansen, Fogarty, and Bi (2015, p. 217)
suggest more attention to be paid to ‘the discursive building blocks underpinning taken-for-granted ways of talking about climate change’. We therefore argue tourism research would benefit from also considering such ‘discursive building blocks’ as it is these that may well offer an insight into why an attitude – behaviour gap exists in tourist behaviours (Hares, Dickinson, & Wilkes, 2010; Higham, Cohen, Peeters, & Gössling, 2013).

**POST-STRUCTURALISM, TOURISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Recently it has been argued that post-structuralism and the ‘critical turn’ have significantly impacted research across the social sciences (e.g. Howarth, 2013) offering considerable potential for tourism research. Tribe (2008) proposes that post-structuralism has the potential to infiltrate tourism research in a range of different ways, noting that positivistic approaches to research inevitably results in technical solutions to tourism issues. Therefore, he suggests that critical thinking is crucial to tourism research to facilitate the ethical management and governance of tourism, in addition to longer-term issues of tourism sustainability (ibid). Likewise, Bramwell and Lane (2014) argue that the time has come for tourism studies, and particularly sustainable tourism research, to engage and embrace critical theory in order to examine inherent power inequalities and structural constraints on individuals within the (sustainable) tourism nexus. However, such positions are couched with caution as they also suggest that research in this area still needs to be grounded in the practical application of findings. It is this level of critique, coupled with the practical application to environmental behaviours in relation to tourism, which the analysis in this paper directly addresses.
At its core, post-structuralism offers a critical stance towards ‘taken for granted’ knowledge of the world. ‘Truth’ is approached as a socially constructed understanding, a condition and consequence of power relations (Holloway, 1989). From this position ‘truth’ is socially produced through various social exchanges and processes that generate negotiated versions of reality, which are not a product of objective observations of society (Burr, 2003). In opposition to the hegemony of positivistic epistemologies that claim to ‘discover’ and promote ‘truth’, a post-structuralist approach enables this research to “make sense of social phenomena” rather than uphold ‘truths’ (Lynn & Lea, 2005, p. 215). Post-structuralism suggests that ‘truth claims’ should be viewed as a politically motivated concept (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996). Therefore, from a post-structuralist framework it is important for research to move away from the pretense of objectivity and the ‘truth’ discovery regime, towards research which attempts to expose socially accepted ‘truths’ and to uncover the dominant discourses which enable and reproduce them. Through exposing prevailing discourses a challenge can be made offering the possibility of resistance, transformation and change (Willig, 2001).

In addition, perception, attitudes and experience must be understood as an individual’s specific ‘reading’ of a situation with numerous alternative readings potentially available (Willig, 2008b). Rather than seeing language as a means to access individuals’ attitudes and experiences, it is approached as constitutive of ‘truth’ and social life (Wetherell, 1998). Thus, it is argued that dominant ‘truths’ and ‘knowledges’ can be examined in relation to their foundations, uses and consequences rather than attempting to discover a ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ (Wetherell, 2001). It is from this standpoint that the researcher can appreciate ways in which language use in a social context creates
meaning; meaning transpires into taken-for-granted knowledge and through this relationship dominant versions of reality are constructed (Willig, 2001) and ‘truths’ upheld (Lynn & Lea, 2005; Scarles, 2009, 2010). Thus, language is always doing something, challenging, reinforcing, supporting, stimulating or undermining (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009).

With the call for tourism research to embrace the ‘critical turn’ that advocates the existence of a multiplicity of ‘truths’ (e.g. Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007; Franklin & Crang, 2001; Tribe, 2008), and tourism research highlighting the ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ in relation to climate change (e.g. Higham, Reis, & Cohen, 2015); this paper suggests there exists a multiplicity of possible public ‘truths’ in relation to anthropogenic climate change. Assuming this position enables contradictory and conflicting ‘truths’ to be exposed by uncovering the range of discourses through which they operate. Such an approach to the topic will allow for exploration of the ways in which responsibility to act in relation to climate change is fundamentally constructed and how that potentially enables and constrains individuals in their thoughts and practices, and the implications of this for tourism practices.

**METHODOLOGY**

*Our Data*

Use of the internet in general has rapidly expanded over the past decade. The world total of internet users was over 3 billion in June of 2014 representing an increase of 741% since 2000. The UK in 2014 had approximately 57m users representing almost 90% of the total UK population, the third largest cohort of internet users in Europe, with Russia first and Germany second (Miniwatts-Marketing-Group, 2015). Such is the
use of the internet in contemporary society that some academics have suggested that it is difficult to overstate its importance in how we experience our lives. For example, referring to the use of internet forums, Beneito-Montagut (2011, p. 717) argues that “everyday life takes place on the internet: there is no difference between online and offline interpersonal communication”. Although research has shown the importance of the body in face-to-face communication (Strengers, 2014), online interpersonal communication is increasingly becoming a feature of many people’s lives, with widespread increasing reliance on social media and user-generated content (UGC) for a wide range of exchange and construction of both expert and lay knowledges (e.g. eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth), online reviews) (e.g. Lester & Scarles, 2014; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Tham, Croy, & Mair, 2013; Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2012; Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016). As such, this warrants further investigation both with regard to its application as data and method, but also the influence such virtual interactions have on the construction of individuals, societies and the knowledge circulating amongst and within these.

Indeed, we are not alone in this assertion with an emerging range of research drawing on online communication to explore the manifestation of social phenomena. For example, Koteyko et al. (2013, p. 84) suggest a need for research to explore the ways in which climate-sceptic positions are played out on social media, through the examination of the discursive resources available to individuals and the implications of these resources. In the Netherlands, Schuth, Marx, and de Rijke (2007, p. 97) utilise the ‘comments’ section on web-based news articles to explore public understandings of immigration, suggesting that such comments from who they consider ‘ordinary people’ are a valuable source of social understanding. Potthast, Stein, Loose, and Becker (2012)
also highlight the usefulness of utilising comments boards as a form of social data. They suggest that such spaces enable individuals to openly express the opinions and criticisms of a current issue immediately, unlike blogs and wikis which they argue are more pre-thought out and ‘work-like’. Finally, Abdul-Mageed (2008, p. 75) argue that “[f]urther research is also needed to target the specific contents of the comments and to uncover the ideologies reflected in them”. Therefore, these recent trends in data collection form the basis for this research to explore the ways of thinking surrounding climate change and the environment, and the implications of these discourses for the domain of tourism, on an internet comment board.

Our data comes from a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news story comments board. The news article utilised in this analysis is entitled ‘Greenhouse gas levels rising at fastest rate since 1984’ and was written by Matt McGrath (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-29115845), the BBC news environment correspondent, and was published on 9th September 2014. The news report draws on the publication of the World Meteorological Organization’s (WMO) Annual Greenhouse Gas Bulletin which highlighted the need for a global climate change treaty due to new data suggesting a reduction in the Earth’s carbon uptake. This article was specifically selected as it represents a banal example of climate change news coverage from a key news outlet in the United Kingdom.

Whilst the article does not represent anything unique in its coverage of the release of the WMO bulletin, the public response to this particular article was profound with 780 comments produced (220 pages of data) resulting in the BBC closing the comments section for this news article in just over 7 hours (between 09.51 and 17.18 on the 9th
In an attempt to offer some point of comparison, Richardson and Stanyer (2011) studied five leading UK national broadsheet newspaper websites over a two week period in February and March 2008, and found that for 25 articles covering the theme of ‘environment’, there was a total of 524 comments split between the 25 articles. Whilst we acknowledge that there has been an increase in engagement with user generated comments over the period, the number of comments, coupled with the BBC closing the comments section in such a short space of time does, in our opinion, represent the significance of the response to this article. The analysis presents a series of participant quotes at the start of each section before analysing the extracts to offer the reader with a clear account of what each participant said as opposed to integrating the quotes and potentially losing the voice of the individuals. Presenting the findings in this way also offers the reader more opportunity to make their own interpretation of the data and is one of the many strategies for the presentation of discourse analytic findings (Taylor, 2001). Throughout the analysis we use pseudonyms for all comments based on the potential identification of individuals through comment usernames.

A similar research design has been adopted in relation to understanding ‘ordinary people’s’ comments on news stories relating to climate change. For example, Koteyko et al. (2013) adopted a similar approach in their study of newspaper comments in relation to the ‘climategate’ scandal. However, they were predominantly interested in the extent to which such an event changed public framings of climate change talk and thus employed content analysis to explore frequent topics or issues discussed throughout their data. Whilst they did offer a brief account of how ‘climate science is discursively constructed by the tabloid readers’ (p. 75), this remained largely secondary to their content analysis findings. Such focus on the discursive constructions of climate
science is the focus of this paper with the aim of offering an in-depth account of the ways in which members of the public draw on, and are positioned by, particular discourses in relation to anthropogenic climate change. However, before such findings are presented a brief account of discourse analysis and the version of discourse analysis adopted in this study is presented.

**The Analytic Process – discourse analysis**

In general terms discourse analysis provides a ‘tool’ to de-construct language, identifying a variety of ‘terms’ or ‘phrases’ in order to examine the production and negotiation of meanings (Clarke & Saraga, 2003). Discourse analysis allows for the examination of the subtle differences in language which create particular versions of reality in specific situations. This enables the researcher to relate what is said and what is not said to the particular setting in order to establish a deeper, more critical view of why discourse is delivered and perhaps more crucially, what it achieves (Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994). Within the broad umbrella of discourse analysis it is argued that there are a variety of discourse analysis techniques (Wetherell, 1998), with Gill (2000) suggesting there is at least 57 varieties. However, within social science research there are three general approaches: ‘Foucauldian discourse analysis’ (e.g. Parker, 1992, 1994), Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 2013), and ‘discursive psychology’ (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Whilst all three offer interesting approaches to discourse and data, the focus of this research is specifically on how discourse enables certain ‘ways of seeing’ and ‘ways of being’; as opposed to for example, a discursive psychological focus on how people use discourse to manage favourable social identities (Edwards & Potter, 1992).
Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA)

FDA is a methodology based on the works and ideas of Michel Foucault and post-structuralist thinking more generally. Foucault argued that discourse is not a means to simply represent the world or mirror reality, but rather that discourse is always productive, constituting human subjects and reality more generally (Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski, 2008). Therefore, Foucault was concerned with the way in which discourse enables and constrains the way in which phenomena can legitimately be spoken about at a particular time and place and what implications this has on individuals in such a system. Whilst Foucault himself did not advocate a method of discourse analysis to explore such issues, individuals such as Ian Parker (1992) have developed his theoretical insights into a method of analysis which focuses on the ways in which discourse functions to construct objects and achieve certain subject positions, subjectivities and ways of being.

In the present study FDA was drawn upon to examine subject positions, relationships between discourses, broader power structures and ultimately how discourses can legitimate particular practices (Parker, 1992, 1994, 1999); in this case, environmentally damaging practices. FDA enabled this research to discover the network of relationships and discourses which naturalise particular ways of being and seeing within a society, which Roland Barthes (1973) referred to as ‘myth’. Here, the authors do not set out to argue either for or against the suggestions that anthropogenic climate change is ‘real’. Rather, this paper closely examines the ways in which the climate debate plays out through dominant discourses on the internet. Further, the analysis presented in the present study does not attempt to examine a representative account of the varying issues discussed by individuals commenting on the news report (as would be the case with
content analysis), but rather seeks to explore the ways in which discourse can facilitate certain ‘ways of seeing’ and ‘ways of being’ in relation to climate change.

This research specifically draws on Willig’s (2008a) six-stage FDA process as it was felt to sufficiently condense Parker’s (1992) original 20 stages into six without compromising its analytic strength. Willig suggests that the process should identify firstly the discursive objects in the data, in our case this was climate change. The next stage of the analysis then looked to identify the discourses at play, that is, the particular ways of talking about the object, for example a scientific discourse to discuss issues of climate change. Our analysis then shifted to the ‘action orientation’ of the talk, for example who is responsible to act by talking about the issue in a particular way? Stage four then involved a close examination of the subject positions produced through the above stages, for example, the position of the educated climate change sceptic. The fifth stage of the analysis sought to explore what Willig refers to as ‘subjectivity’, that is, the ways in which individuals are able to understand and experience their lives based on how the object is constructed. Finally the analysis required the researcher to explore the implications of the above five stages; we engage with this element in the discussion section of this article, which examines the findings of this analysis in relation to current research and practice in sustainable tourism.

Thus, what follows presents our interpretations of the ways in which climate change is constructed, negotiated and mobilised through the discursive sensibilities employed by the participants of the comments. In addition, the analysis scrutinises the contradictions and struggles individuals face in debating notions of climate change in the public domain. Throughout we suggest how these can be understood as complex discursive
formations that both enable and constrain individuals and their positions in relation to climate change, general environmental practices, and more specifically sustainable forms of tourism. The analysis is divided into three sections to explore how climate change, and responsibility for action, are constructed and negotiated. Whilst all three sections are interrelated the construction of responsibility will examined via: scientific scepticism, ‘othering’, and environmental benefits.

ANALYSIS

Responsibility - scientific scepticism and ambiguity

First, attention turns to scientific scepticism and how discourses of ambiguity and critique emerge through online conversations:

The planet has not been warming up for over 15 years and a recent computer model on which all this climate guesswork is based suggests it won’t for another 25 years. And yet figures suggest CO\textsubscript{2} in the atmosphere has shot up. Looks like the climate change SCAM has finally been rumbled (John)

So the earth is 4.5 billion years old and we have been testing the atmosphere for how long? A difference of a few percent in 34 years compared to the 4.5 billion…less than decades is not enough data (Carl)

For the love of all things holy will we please stop wasting money and time on this carbon dioxide nonsense! Record CO\textsubscript{2}, no warming, models veering comprehensively away from reality since they were created…make sure you NEVER listen to another word a greenie mouth utters (Lucy)
Yet another report which has cost heaven knows what to produce telling us something different from the last one. Just a few weeks ago I was reading that “global warming” has not increased in decades now this one contradicts that. Oh well, keeps people in work, I suppose. However, I cannot help feeling that the money spent on producing these reports could be better utilized elsewhere (Ben)

Throughout the above extracts a scientific discourse is actively utilised to negotiate the expression of a potentially problematic position; that of climate change denial. However, the process of denying climate change is not simply as straight forward as denouncing ‘science’. Indeed as Koteyko et al. (2013, p. 81) note in their analysis of the ‘climategate’ scandal, denouncing science and the denial of climate change function through a more complex interlink of essentially the same scientific discourse. For example, in John’s account we see a strong scientific discourse employed throughout to present a dichotomy between the said ‘guesswork’ and the unsaid ‘evidence’.

However, what is interesting is the way that two heavily dichotomous positions, i.e. science as incorrect, and science as correct, function through the power of the very same discourse. For example, drawing on scientific tropes a position is created to deny climate change as an issue through utterances such as “figures suggest CO$_2$ in the atmosphere has shot up”. In this account scientific ‘evidence’ is being objectively relied on to present a version of the state of the planet, yet this statement is actually functioning to make the case that CO$_2$ (i.e. anthropogenic impacts) is not having an impact on the environment as “the planet has not been warming up for over 15 years…it
won’t for another 25 years”. Thus whilst locating climate science as ‘climate guesswork’ based on a ‘computer model’, climate science is also situated as a legitimate source of information through the non-questioning statement that CO₂ has “shot up”. Such rhetorical positioning enables the legitimation of the final positional statement that the ‘climate change SCAM has finally been rumbled’ without this appearing as though it was simply an irrational ‘conspiracy theory’ or similar.

Carl utilizes two similarly contradicting scientific arguments. Here an evolutionary scientific discourse is employed to create the ‘objective’ fact that indeed the “earth” has existed for “4.5 billion years”, a statement inherently linked to geological science to date the earth’s existence. Yet in this extract an outright dismissal of the ‘other’ “guesswork” science is not being mobilised to deny climate change as a ‘real’ issue (Koteyko et al., 2013, p. 83). Rather the evolutionary scientific discourse is employed to doubt not the basis of science, but the ‘quality’ of the evidence over such a short period of time. Inherent within this position is what Gavin & Marshall (2011, p. 1037) refer to as a focus on ‘natural and solar variability’ that they suggest individuals draw upon to present the situation in which ‘observed temperature fluctuations’ are merely a result of ‘normal’ processes; a discursive strategy Shani and Arad (2014) also employed in their attempt to make room for climate scepticism in tourism research.

More specifically, through the evolutionary scientific discourse both the position of insufficient longitudinal evidence, and the more implicit site of the ‘earth as adaptive’ are able to circulate through the explicit acceptance of the scientific evidence that indeed there has been a “few percent” change in the earth’s climate. Therefore, through an evolutionary scientific discourse climate change can be constructed and denied from
the position of an ‘educated’ and ‘rational’ individual weighing up the scientific evidence available.

Lucy and Ben’s accounts function through an eclectic mix of both a scientific and economic discourse. Throughout both it is clear that science is both the provider of evidence (e.g. “record CO₂”, ‘global warming’ has not increased”), whilst also being the source of misinformation (e.g. “models veering comprehensively away from reality”, “this one contradicts that”). In addition to this scientific scepticism, an economic discourse is employed through utterances such as: “wasting money”, “cost[ing] heaven knows what”, “money spent”, to present a situation in which not only is the evidence questioned, but also the motivations of the individuals conducting the science. McCright and Dunlap (2000) highlight a similar rhetoric in their assessment of conservative think-tanks in the USA. For example, they find scepticism towards climate change functioning through a questioning of the motivations for scientists being inherently linked to finance and work (Hanson-Easey et al., 2015). Drawing on an economic discourse in this context facilitates implicit suggestions of corruption and alternative motives in order to further fracture the strength of the climate change science and subsequently legitimise climate change denial and quash claims of personal responsibility to act (Jaspal, Nerlich, & Koteyko, 2012). Indeed, such tropes in denialism are said to represent a similar rhetoric to that employed by tobacco firms when attempting to debunk the scientific evidence behind the ill effects of smoking, through a strategy Diethelm and McKee (2009, p. 2) refer to as ‘inversionism’. Such a strategy it could be suggested underlies discussions on the impacts of tourists’ air transport behaviours, where a psychology of denial has been identified (Gössling & Peeters, 2007; Hares et al., 2010).
Responsibility – eco nationalism and the other

Secondly, we address the issue of responsibility, eco-nationalism and ‘othering’. As the following comments highlight:

We must apply economic sanctions against China now, a ban on all China imports would be a great start (Julie)

With countries like China etc who will never listen to any report, try telling them they have their heads in the sand. We (my family) are doing all we can, but it will have no effect unless we all get on it. At the minute Volcanoes pose one of the biggest problems as we cannot tell them to stop pumping out into the atmosphere (Steve)

Before we blame everything man-made – let’s look at how many volcanoes have erupted in the past year, let’s look at which countries have rising CO₂ levels year on year Hmm China – India what are they doing to reduce CO₂ not very much (Claire)

It doesn't matter - vacuum cleaners, light bulbs & choosing an eco-toaster has negligible effect while China, USA, India carry on regardless - lack of oil, food or natural disaster will be what gets our future generations. We are doomed! (Adam)
These findings reflect public understandings of sustainable tourism identified by Miller et al. (2010) where respondents expressed the need for external parties to take responsibility, that was also underpinned by the need for behaviour change to be led by example, and a recognition of accountability by all stakeholders (including countries such as China and the US). Indeed, throughout the extracts above the ‘blame game’, or ‘blame narrative’ (e.g. Marshall, 2014) between the good ‘us’ and the bad ‘them’ is played out from the start through a nationalist discourse. Such a rhetorical strategy has long been explored as a way in which ‘subtle’ racism circulates implicitly throughout everyday ways of talking about banal issues (Billig, 1995). Throughout all extracts “China” consistently becomes the subject of this disparaging discourse resulting in the responsibility to act firmly located within the practices and actions of the distant other.

Not only is responsibility displaced through such ways of talking about climate change and emissions but it also serves to construct a ‘version of events’ in which key evidence is omitted from the exchange. Similar ways of talking were found in Gavin and Marshall’s (2011) analysis of news reports of the Copenhagen summit highlighting the extent to which these have been accepted as a ‘ways of talking’ about climate change which circulates through ‘common knowledge’. As Gavin and Marshall (2011, p. 1039) comment “Wholly omitted here is reference to historical emissions, relative emissions per head, or production for export, discursive elements that would have put all of this in a quite different judgmental frame”. Therefore, through the process of ‘othering’ a reality is constructed in which the ‘us’ is presented as both morally and ethically ‘superior’ to others (Petros, Airhihenbuwa, Simbayi, Ramlagan, & Brown, 2006).
Whilst China is the constant ‘them’, ‘India’ and the ‘USA’ also feature in the above extracts as bad ‘other’. The way in which there is constant reference to the “we” (presumably the UK national) and the “them” (China, India and the USA) can be understood as part of the process of constructing and maintaining social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The power of social identities in enabling and preventing sustainable tourism behaviours has been a recent subject of research (Hibbert, Dickinson, Gössling, & Curtin, 2013), with the present findings suggesting that social identity theory can add significant insight into the public’s failure to rein in unsustainable tourism practices. Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory tries to explain social behaviour in terms of the processes of social categorisation, social comparison, and social identification. Social identity theory assumes that individuals always try to maintain a positive view of themselves. Thus, through the nationalist discourse inherent in this climate change talk an appeal is made to the ‘in’ group via a disparaging of an ‘out’ group. Not only does such discourse function to exonerate the UK national from any sense of responsibility in this global issue, but it can also be understood as a manifestation of intergroup conflict and discrimination in which “hostilities and strong negative feelings towards the outgroup were matched by a strong identification with the ingroup” (Tuffin, 2005, p. 114). Thus through this process of ‘othering’ the outgroup is not only constructed in direct opposition to the environmentally conscious ingroup, but also defines them as ‘morally and/or intellectually inferior’ (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 423, cited in Jensen, 2011).

Analysis of climate change discourse influenced by psychoanalytic traditions points to similar processes of ‘splitting’ at work in the dynamics of othering. Splitting is an unconscious response to an inability to accept the reality that both self and other contain
'good’ and ‘bad’ aspects. It is a way of avoiding the anxiety of ambivalence; a defence mechanism in which the ‘unflattering parts of the self, unacceptable desires or unwelcome knowledge can be split off and projected into other people, other times or other places’ (Randall, 2009, p. 119). This mechanism is prevalent in the socially organised narratives we use to make sense of climate change as a problem (Norgaard, 2011; Randall, 2009). Here we can discern splitting in the projection of responsibility for ecological degradation onto others, whilst ‘we’ strive to make a difference; producing the comforting dividing line between a ‘monstrous’ other and an idealised self.

In addition to responsibility being firmly located with ‘them’ to act through explicit ‘othering’ in what McCright and Dunlap (2000, p. 512) suggest is more ‘name-calling’ than ‘actual scientific discussion’, a psychological discourse of ‘learned-helplessness’ (Seligman, 1972) also functions throughout. Through reference to “doing all we can, but it will have no effect”, pro-environmental practices having a “negligible effect” and “we are all doomed”, a reality in which it becomes pointless to act due to the insufficient impact of behavioural change for the collective ‘we’ is brought to the foreground. In support of such a rational argument not to act, an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) is presented in which “lack of oil, food or natural disaster will be what gets our future generations”. Representations of catastrophe and apocalypse are common in climate change communication (Swyngedouw, 2010), though as we see here, it is not necessarily conducive to a sense of personal or collective responsibility.

Such explicit forms of othering are argued to be emblematic of climate change discourse across a range of cultures. For example, in a similar light to Billett’s (2010)
research on Indian media coverage it is clear that the impacts of climate change are located within the ‘us’ whilst the responsibility to act and cause of the problem is located within the actions of the irresponsible, if not actively malicious, ‘other’. However, not only is this cause of the problem positioned as a characteristic of the specific actions of a few countries (namely China, India and the USA – the reputed ‘big emitters’) but also that of nature itself. Indeed, “volcanoes” are presented as a source of the climate crisis and thus whilst there is a general acceptance throughout the above quotes that climate change is happening, the human and nature ‘other’ facilitates a learned helplessness in which the collective ‘we’ are not responsible and not compelled to act.

Responsibility – Environmental benefits and food for plants

The first two sections of this analysis have focused on the different ways in which discourses circulate in relation to climate change talk which function in the displacement of responsibility and present a rational argument for environmental inaction. The first section explored the ways in which scientific scepticism functions whilst the second section explored notions of ‘othering’ in climate change talk. This final section explores a different set of discourses that function not to present inaction as a plausible response to the current situation, but rather the potential for increasing negative environmental actions through the imagined benefits CO₂ emissions from human actions actually offer nature, a discursive strategy also mobilised in Shani and Arad’s (2014) attempt to foment climate scepticism in tourism research. Through an active challenge to what Harper (2001) documents as the “Environmental Master Narrative”, in which people throughout the world imagine the environment as an object threatened by human action, a counter-claim similar to that identified by McCright and
Dunlap (2000) functions to actively challenge the scientific consensus that climate change is a major issue. As the following comments illustrate:

Higher CO₂ concentrations lead to improved yield on crops. Given the uncontrolled expansion of human population (which is driving the CO₂ rises) this is probably just as well (Victoria)

The growth rings seen on trees cut for timber will show increased growth. Vegetation will take whatever CO₂ is on offer. Calm down and carry on. (Laura)

CO₂ is the food for vegetation. More CO₂ means more trees grow, so it must be good for the plants. Methane is, however, a stronger greenhouse agent and isn’t helping trees at all. That’s livestock emissions… (James)

CO₂ is plant food – good for growing crops to feed people (Richard)

Functioning through a bio-scientific discourse the above extracts present an alternative, and to our knowledge unexplored, account of nature as the recipient of the benefits of anthropogenic CO₂ emissions. Here lay ‘horticultural knowledge’ is utilised to present CO₂ as a positive form of “plant food” which facilitates “improved yields”, “increased growth”, and “more trees”. A deterministic rhetoric is employed in which such effects are presented simply as the direct result of the increased CO₂ in the atmosphere. Drawing on tropes of biology through reference to elements such as “growth rings on trees” and positioning it in opposition to ‘bad’ chemicals such as “methane”, an environmentally knowledgeable subject is presented. Indeed, such is the power of the
narrative utilised throughout these quotes that in Victoria and Richard’s accounts the increase in CO₂ emissions as a result of “uncontrolled” population growth and increased consumption is actually presented as the solution to the issue of population growth and increased consumption.

Furthermore, an evolutionary narrative in which nature has the unrestricted capacity to adapt to its surroundings and “take whatever CO₂ is on offer” enables the construction of a truth about anthropogenic climate change in which individuals are actually responsible for the consumption and subsequent emission of more CO₂ as a way to sustain plant life, “trees” and “vegetation”. In effect what we see is the result of the propaganda that Gelbspan (2005) clearly articulates as the work of very powerful oil and coal companies determined to fuel climate scepticism through their unparalleled dedication to creating an alternative ‘truth’ about the effect of carbon emissions on the environment. Thus in a similar light McCright and Dunlap (2000, p. 514) offer a conclusion on such rhetoric suggesting “[b]y challenging the allegedly pessimistic claims of environmentalists with an optimistic counter-claim, the conservatives are able to challenge further the claim that global warming is a problem”. Indeed, we contend further that such ‘ways of talking’ about climate change not only function to challenge the claim that global warming is an issue, but go further to suggest that we are exonerated from the responsibility to act; in fact we are compelled to continue as normal - we should “calm down and carry on” or increase our carbon consumption in order to meet the demands to “feed people”.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine the ways in which broader issues of anthropogenic
climate change are discussed on an internet comments page and the role such comments play in establishing a platform for knowledge exchange and the emergence of subsequent discourses and understanding regarding climate change within the general public. In doing so, the article has also demonstrated the methodological usefulness of looking to broader data, in this case a news story comments board, for tourism research. Throughout the analysis we have shown that prevailing discourses surrounding climate change enable a ‘reality’ in which the individuals speaking negotiate issues of individual responsibility resulting in environmental inaction. The opening section explored the ways in which a more common scientific scepticism functions through the use of a scientific discourse which functions to challenge the proposition that anthropogenic climate change exists (e.g. Koteyko et al., 2013). Attention then shifted in the second section of the analysis to explore the ways in which anthropogenic climate change is not challenged as an issue faced, but rather through processes of othering the cause and solution of the problem is firmly located away from the individual located in the UK (e.g. Gavin & Marshall, 2011). Finally, an alternative ‘way of talking’ about climate change we identified in our data was explored to highlight how horticultural knowledge is being employed to suggest that far from being an issue, anthropogenic CO₂ emissions is actually a good thing as it facilitates increased crop yields, a point argued to be essential in the plight to feed the world’s populations. As we mentioned at the start of the article, the purpose here is not to ‘prove’ or ‘disprove’ dimensions of anthropogenic climate change but rather to explore the ways in which particular discourses are utilised in ways of talking about climate change to achieve certain means. From our analysis it is clear that all three of the ‘ways of talking’ about climate change serve to present a situation in which responsibility to act against the effects of climate change is diminished.
In the context of tourism behaviours and the promotion of sustainable tourism it appears that these broader ways of talking are serious barriers for efforts to encourage a social movement towards more climatically sustainable forms of tourism. It has been noted by Barr et al. (2010) that the tourism domain offers a new set of challenges for sustainability as it is often the case that even those whom act ‘environmentally responsibly’ in their everyday lives may well not in the tourism arena as it is a distinctly different space. In addition, research into sustainable tourism has highlighted that there is indeed a ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ in which individuals often state they will behave more sustainably in relation to their holiday decisions but when it actually comes to making the decisions they tend to revert to more high polluting practices (e.g. Higham et al., 2015). Finally, as was noted at the start of this paper, even those within tourism research have recently debated the impact of tourism on anthropogenic climate change (e.g. Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2014a, 2014b; Shani & Arad, 2014, 2015). Therefore, whilst this research is positioned as the start of a move to more research that critically considers the ways in which discourse is ‘always doing something’ (Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski, 2008), what we have shown also goes some way in helping understand how broader climate change talk can help to explain why inaction appears to be the ‘rational’ choice.

Therefore, this article has sought to expose the ways in which broader climate change talk functions to present a situation in which the individual is far from compelled to engage in climatically sustainable tourism, if not ‘irrational’ if they do act. In addition, it has been proposed how such understandings could help tourism researchers to explore some of the broader sociological issues that position, enable, and constrain notions of
sustainability in relation to tourism. This paper adds further evidence and urgency to the argument that public behaviour change will not be sufficient in its own right to move tourism on to a sustainable emissions path, and that stronger policy measures will be needed in order to mitigate tourism’s increasing contribution to climate change (Higham, Cohen, Cavaliere, Reis, & Finkler, 2016). Despite the recent political consensus of the Paris Agreement, everyday climate talk, at least in the UK, continues to absolve the public of personal responsibility.

Finally, this article goes some way in attempting to address Tribe (2008) and Bramwell and Lane’s (2014) call that tourism research needs to start taking more from critical theory in order to compliment the positivistic research in tourism which can only go so far in understanding the complexities of the issues faced within the arena. Therefore, we would like to conclude with a call for future research in tourism to take critical and post-structuralist theory further in tourism research in order to start to understand why the ways of talking we have identified are prominent in contemporary society and what the implications are for moving towards more sustainable forms of tourism. Inroads are being made outside of tourism in terms of the ‘social organization of denial’ (Norgaard, 2006, 2011) and ‘terror management’ (Dickinson, 2009) and thus we suggest that such approaches are given more focus in tourism, particularly sustainable tourism, theory and research.

REFERENCES


