

THE IDEOLOGY OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A CRITICAL REVIEW

*Faye Taylor

Faculty of Business and Law
De Montfort University, England

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a background to the origins of sustainable tourism development, highlighting key areas of rationale for adoption. The paper's main focus however will encourage the audience to question Western ideological discourse, suggesting that despite its benefits there appear many limitations associated with the adoption of sustainability principles to include the juxtaposition of definitions, implementation difficulties and the influence of political-economic power in shaping development. As identified by Tosun (2000) in his research surrounding sustainable development in developing countries, 'any operation of principles of sustainable development necessitates hard political and economic choices, and decisions based upon complex socio-economic and environmental trade-offs'. These trade-offs appear to a greater extent to be shaped by not only the political economy within which the destination operates but also under the pressures of global political-economic forces.

Key Words: Tourism, Sustainable Development, Stakeholders, Power, Globalisation, Eco-Tourism

INTRODUCTION

Whilst sustainable tourism development is a phenomenon of the 1990s, its origins evolve from sustainable development, which has, it can be argued, been practised since the fourteenth century, commencing with traditional agricultural systems and through conservation, community and economic theory in ancient form (Swarbrooke 1999:3; Hardy et al 2002). It is suggested that the thinking behind sustainable development evolved primarily through a shift in the prevailing 'dominant western environmental paradigm' of the 1950's and 60's (Sustainable Development Commission, UK), resulting in increased recognition of the adverse effects to be experienced through the quest for economic development with minimal regard for the environment (Weaver and Lawton 2002:342; Hardy et al 2002). This growing concern with the environmental effects of industrialisation; evidenced in the depletion of forests, the ozone and subsequent global warming (UK Government, Sustainable Development Unit) resulted in an emergent world view that challenged the prevailing 'dominant western environmental paradigm', and opposed the consumption patterns that were placing a burden upon the environment (UK Government, Sustainable development Unit). Thus evolved the 'green paradigm', which gave birth to a focus upon alternate business strategies, designed to enhance environmental preservation and conservation of natural resources with increased emphasis upon the future.

This paradigm shift was first acknowledged at a UN conference on Humans and the Environment in Stockholm in 1972, being the first in a series of conferences to discuss global environmental issues, marking the convergence between economic development and environmentalism (Hardy et al 2002). The term 'sustainable development' was not introduced at this point, however 'the international community agreed to the notion – now fundamental to sustainable development - that both development and the environment, hitherto addressed as separate issues, could be managed in a mutually beneficial way' (Sustainable Development Commission, UK). With growing popularity, this emergent paradigm was furthered in order to provide a 'classic definition' of the phrase 'sustainable development' in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development in a report entitled 'Our Common Future', more commonly known as the 'Brundtland Report' (Sustainable Development Commission, UK). It was claimed that sustainability is a concept considered pertinent to the long-term effectiveness of industry in order to, 'achieve development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987:43), encompassing three dimensions, namely the environment, people and economic systems (Swarbrooke 1999:3). It is argued that even at present we are not meeting global

needs let alone making provision for the future (UK Government, Sustainable Development Unit) and it was deemed that unless action was taken to address this shortfall, we would face an uncertain future.

Within International forums, Sustainable development was first addressed in 1992 at the Earth Summit of the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro (www.un.org, accessed 27 July 2005). The resulting action of this conference established the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, responsible for the publication of seminal policies, designed to provide guidance concerning the purpose and implementation of sustainability, two of the most visible being the 'Agenda 21' and the 'Rio Declaration on Environment and Development' (UN 1992). This conference was designed primarily to discuss industrial development; the concepts derived were later applied to the development of tourism resulting in an increased pressure upon tourism industry stakeholders to address sustainable development. This pressure, derived from the growing recognition of environmental issues such as global warming, pollution, ozone depletion and deforestation, and fuelled by the Rio Summit and Agenda 21, has not only placed greater emphasis upon sustainable development of industry but that of the development of tourism, as it is acknowledged that not only does tourism constitute a major global industry (Cooper et al 1998), but equally that tourism can act as a force for and act as an aide to development (Scheyvens 2002). Ironically however, despite this rhetoric there continues a trend in consumerism, whereby, according to Tangwisutijit, 'our tourism industry is based on artificiality and instant returns' (Tangwisutijit 2004), thus correlating with the temporal constraints of tourism activities themselves, creating a feeling that tourism, and consequently tourism development is against the clock. And with increasingly sophisticated demands of new consumers (Poon 1993), places great pressures upon industry to meet the infrastructure demands of these new consumers in new 'untouched' locations, with limited lead in time for detailed planning.

PURPOSE OF PAPER

Having already provided a background to the origins and increasing awareness of sustainable development this paper will initially highlight arguments for the adoption of sustainability principles by the tourism industry. The main body will then proceed to counter-argue the adoption of sustainability principles through an analysis of some of the inherent limitations of the ideology. This will commence with a discussion of the difficulty of assigning definitions of sustainability in order to provide guidance for implementation, within the context of diverse destinations and complex stakeholder requirements. This discussion will be furthered to highlight some of the challenges for implementation of sustainability principles to include an examination of stakeholder interests, sources of power and influence and their commitment, one of the pivotal considerations for sustainability theory. Emphasis will then be given to challenging the feasibility of sustainable development within the context of international political economy, examining ideological and globalising values and the interaction and influence of power bases to shape discourse. The purpose of this paper is to challenge the ideology of sustainable tourism development, highlighting some of the important considerations that must be made when attempting to integrate sustainable development principles into the process of destination development and recognizing that the process of implementation may not be as straightforward as discourse would suggest, an area of research that is often overlooked (Liu 2003).

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

So what is the rationale behind a more sustainable focus to tourism development? It is widely recognised that despite the positive potential impacts to be reaped by a destination characterised as 'mass tourism', to include economic improvement and infrastructure development, there are also significant potential detrimental impacts, particularly of an environmental and social nature to be experienced. It is claimed that the level of development in a destination may bear implications for primarily the type of tourism that takes place, the subsequent typology of tourists in that destination and the consequent impacts that ensue. The starting point therefore would be to acknowledge that some commentators would suggest that 'sustainable tourism' can be viewed as an alternative to 'mass tourism' (Weaver and Lawton 2002) and that through alternative strategies to mass tourism, destinations and industry alike may contribute toward sustainable development. Swarbrooke

(1998:10) highlights a detailed rationale for the adoption of sustainability principles to include an increased understanding of the impacts of tourism, a fair distribution of benefits and costs and importantly, equitable and transparent consultation and decision making processes.

Whether 'Sustainable' tourism can truly be classified in contrast to mass tourism is a debate for another time and another paper. Nevertheless, it is clear that the previous and (sometimes still) present nature of tourism development in many destinations warrants attention with greater emphasis placed upon longevity of the tourism destination, rather than a quest for rapid development, often associated with immediate economic gain. There is longstanding evidence of environmental or social neglect in pursuit of economic gain, just some of the countless examples in South East Asia being evidenced in Langkawi, Malaysia, whereby traditional livelihoods are threatened by tourism pursued by the Malaysian Government as 'one of the most important development tools of the decade' (Multinational Monitor 1991). Whilst other, socially oriented impacts, such as the dramatic increase in child prostitution across the region, has been linked to the development of mass tourism (ECPAT 1992). More recent examples are highlighted in the cases of the Banaue Rice Terraces in the Northern Phillipines, a World Heritage Site which, due to water shortages and the effect of earthworms are in a state of deterioration. Tourism is claimed to have exacerbated these environmental problems due to the high consumption levels in the booming number of hotels and guesthouses in the area (Malanes 1999). In addition, severe deforestation has occurred in order to accommodate tourism infrastructure, depleting the natural resources, which were previously used to sustain livelihoods, through traditional woodcarvings. This further demonstrates the effect of tourism in superseding traditional livelihoods to incur reliance upon the tourism industry.

In pursuit then, of alternative tourism strategies that have a long-term focus and aim to minimize these type of economic, environmental and social impacts as aforementioned, there is much evidence to suggest or at least claim that 'sustainable' should be our goal. These claims are voiced by proponents of the green movement, highlighting that destinations and the tourism industry alike should seek to improve environmental practices, protect cultural heritage and ensure equitable distribution of wealth generated through tourism (Kamemba 2003; Swarbrooke 1998; Liu 2003). It is considered that these impacts may be controlled through alternative tourism strategies (Liu 2003), that fall under the umbrella term of 'Sustainable Tourism', familiarized under the terms 'eco-tourism' or 'community based tourism', common in their objective to provide a type of tourism that is long-lasting and more beneficial in not only economic terms but socio-cultural and environmental terms to varying extents. However in practice it is claimed that none of these instruments can be relied on as a means toward sustainable tourism development (Liu 2003).

CONCEPTUALISING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Whilst it is evident that the rhetoric of Sustainable Tourism Development is clearly appealing, for implementation to take place the meaning must primarily be clarified for tourism industry stakeholders. It is the 'classic definition' as provided in the Brundtland Report that has been developed and adapted by a range of development stakeholders to emanate a definition that best suits their particular needs and role within the development process, resulting in the absence of one definitive definition of sustainable development but rather many that operate along similar lines (Sustainable Development Commission, UK). These definitions vary dependent upon the way temporal, economic, social and environmental considerations are emphasised (Sustainable Development Commission, UK). It is also highlighted by existing authors in this field that traditionally more focus has been placed upon the environmental and economic impacts and more focus should be given to community involvement (Hardy et al 2002). When applied to the development of tourism, the classic definition is interpreted and provided as the generic definition to guide stakeholders by the WTO (2001) as, 'meeting the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future.' In fact, this definition fails not only to provide specific guidance upon how sustainable tourism is achieved but offers only quite a vague statement that makes reference to the longevity of the tourism product. This point precisely is highlighted by Liu (2003) in her critique of sustainable development by identifying a comprehensive yet only representative range of the definitions available for sustainable tourism, whilst offering

similar underlying principles, each differs, only serving to further confuse destination stakeholders as to the true meaning of sustainable tourism development.

One area of consideration are the three pillars of sustainable development; environmental, social and economic factors. There appears to be minimal guidance as to the extent of emphasis that should be placed upon each dimension in contemporary practice of Sustainable Development, however it is argued that it is not important to get bogged down in a 'definitional quagmire' (Sustainable Development Commission). Nevertheless, without a clear understanding of the meaning of sustainable tourism development, how might tourism stakeholders measure achievement? Butler (1993) provides his own definition, highlighting that, 'tourism which is developed and maintained in an area in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical)', evidently recognizing the dual importance of longevity 'sustainable tourism' but also environmental and social sustainability, i.e. 'sustainable tourism development', thus might be judged as an appropriate definition to encompass the philosophy of sustainable development when applied to tourism. Nevertheless, there is no guidance to suggest the meaning of 'true' sustainability, i.e. to what extent should emphasis be placed upon each dimension. This classic definition can therefore be considered problematic as it fails to consider the nature and location of the destination and, in addition, provides little guidance upon how sustainability is to be achieved. This critique offers further implications in so far that, in practice, sustainable development is particularly difficult to implement and measure due to its flexibility and lack of rigid enforcement in addition to the absence of a unified definition (Swarbrooke 1999:13).

It has been recognised furthermore by some commentators that host governments should differentiate between sustainable tourism and sustainable tourism development, highlighting that the two offer entirely different principles and associated impacts and are sometimes used 'loosely and interchangeably' (Liu 2003). On one hand, the development of sustainable tourism infers that the tourism industry can be sustained i.e. offer long-term prospects and the tourism industry will support the community for many years to come. It can be identified that this misconception and the quest for sustainable tourism can incur over-reliance upon the tourism industry and enhanced focus upon sustaining the tourism industry to the detriment of host community needs. Sustainable tourism development however is concerned with not solely the maintenance of the tourism industry yet social, environmental and economic factors. It is this subtle difference, not forgetting the flexibility of the term, which could potentially mean a misunderstanding of the true meaning of sustainable development by destination planners and subsequently would result in inadequate planning or failure to address sustainability principles. Another most vital component to the success of implementation is a comprehensive commitment to sustainable tourism development is also required which is not always possible in the face of competing stakeholder interests. Scheyvens (2002) supports this view, highlighting that at a destination level, there is a complex interplay of class, values and power and this power may be exercised with a view to obtaining the outcome most preferable to higher status members of society, therefore resulting due to lack of resources, that some members within the host community may experience difficulties in securing the benefits of tourism. Equitable participation and consultation in the planning process is therefore a key challenge to tourism developers.

Further enforcement difficulties are reported by the research of Liu (2003 as cited in McCool et al 2001) that despite decades of support for sustainable tourism development, there is still disagreement on what should be sustained and the appropriate indicators to be used to measure implementation. In fact, it is often claimed that an act more challenging than conceptualising sustainable tourism development is that of 'developing an effective, yet practical measurement process' (Murphy 1998:180). To allow measurement of sustainability the dimensions or principles of sustainable tourism development are often adapted to form codes of conduct or indicators, however these fail to act as an appropriate measurement process if we do not consider obtaining support from industry stakeholders and the contextual realms within which tourism takes place. To facilitate implementation of sustainability policies, the recognition of the need for community involvement in consultation and planning is vital in order to lessen the likelihood of community alienation and subsequent potential opposition of the development (Hardy et al 2002) and also to ensure that the 'local community', often viewed as the hospitality resource of the destination (Smith 1994), gain to a

greater extent from tourism interaction, to ensure that they are motivated to preserve the tourism resources and offer support for the industry (Liu 2003).

Sustainable Tourism Development can be realized through practices such as eco-tourism, community-based tourism, nature-based tourism, agro-tourism to name but a few, all of which claim to avoid (or at least attempt to minimize) limitations associated with mass tourism, protecting and enhancing the environment, maintaining local control and optimizing the quality of life for destination inhabitants, however, as has been evidenced through research conducted by such authors as Kontogeorgopoulos (2005), Pleumarom (1999), Liu (2003) the benefits of these forms of tourism may not be fully realized and on occasion may be used inappropriately as a marketing tool, 'in the spirit of international good will' (Pleumarom 1999) with the underlying intention of generating greater tourist numbers; an issue which will be discussed at length in this paper.

WESTERN IDEOLOGY

There are many global powers, to include Governments, Financial Institutions and the Tourism Industry who claim 'Sustainable Development' should be pursued for the benefit of all stakeholders within a tourism destination, and clearly many of their arguments are well justified. However, whilst recognising that there are significant benefits to be gained through a sustainable approach to development, it must be noted that it would be wrong to impose sustainable development upon destinations, solely because Western opinion deems it appropriate. If one examines sustainability on a global scale it could be suggested that this ideology has been the resultant paradigm of certain 'dominant political powers' (Mowforth and Munt 2003:46) further demonstrating the influence of economic and political power over global belief. Sustainability has largely evolved within the First World on the understanding that its principles suit the needs of the First World and through the ideology of environmentalism. This further accentuates the power of dominant First World economies to influence decision-making in their second and third world counterparts, demonstrating the hegemonic properties of sustainable development as a principle (Mowforth and Munt 2003:47). This ideology would be considered highly unsuitable when developed nations claim the power and expertise to suggest that sustainable development should be practised by all, when they might have failed to achieve this in their own country (Pleumarom, A. 1994). As Pleumarom (1994) has highlighted in her research surrounding the politics of golf tourism, 'the new green twists and turns in international decision making are being made with claims to a new morality of global solidarity. This must be the biggest irony in human history: those who have been the most immoral in human history are now preaching to those who have been largely frugal and sparing' (adapted from The Indian Centre for Science and Environment 1992).

In fact, one might observe that the majority of literature surrounding sustainable tourism development originates from sources within developed countries, representing an ideal type of development, which is feasible given the right economic, political and social environment, yet fails to acknowledge the specific nature of less economically and socially developed countries, usually the type of destination that is attractive to tourists due to their rich environmental diversity and traditional cultural practices, that may prohibit the achievement of this type of development (Tosun 2001). This is reinforced by research undertaken by Tosun (2001) into the feasibility of sustainable tourism development in Turkey, recognising that certain environmental factors such as national economy priorities, lack of contemporary tourism development approach and the structure of the public administration system in less economically and socially developed countries may act as restrictions to sustainable tourism development creating a 'get rich quick' mentality. Other authors such as De Chavez (1999) argue that, 'it is no wonder therefore that cash-starved Third World countries view tourism as a shortcut to rapid development' due to tourism's ability as an export strategy, boosting the balance of payments and providing the financial capability for development. Nevertheless, both the 'quick-fix' mentality and also the requirement for many Lesser Economically Developed Countries to accept finance packages such as the International Monetary Fund Structural Adjustment Policies with their predetermined conditions for the liberalisation of their economy, in order primarily just to provide the finance to pursue a policy of tourism development, leaves developing countries wide open to mass unplanned development, exploitation and takeover by international organisations, which, by nature, is not sustainable.

GLOBALISATION

It could further be argued that sustainable development, despite its ideological discourse, depicts another form of globalisation (in the transfer of global ideology) that could be potentially as damaging as cultural imperialism experienced by the entry of Multinational Corporations in rural areas that can be characterised by inappropriate development and inadequate consultation to suit primarily the business interests of the dominant power (Mowforth and Munt 2003:51). Globalisation, although hailed to be beneficial in terms of growth of foreign trade and the path to greater wealth and success (McLaren 2003) through the transfer of services, cultural values and technology amongst other factors (Martens, P. and Rotmans, J. 2005), has been subject to much criticism. The act of transfer, means an accentuated freedom for dominant world powers, in the form of economic wealth, multinational corporations, political powers and financial institutions to impose their values upon the weaker party in their interactions, leveraging any influence they may have in the development of sustainable tourism development strategies (Pleumarom 1999). Globalisation is argued to be a significant transformationary force, following that of Colonisation, and in a similar manner, has changed the social and economic structures of many developing countries resulting in a deep integration of western values and financial dependency upon dominant world powers (Khor 1996). Globalisation has been facilitated not only through International Monetary Fund-World Bank conditionality but the World Trade Organisation General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), resulting in the increased takeover of business by foreign investors to provide necessary capital for development, which subsequently may mean greater repatriation of profits and a lack of ability for community involvement in decision making processes (De Chavez 1999). Many commentators, to include Khor (1996) and McLaren (2003) suggest that globalisation has created a situation whereby the 'Global North' can easily access, and claim power over the 'Global South', leveraging the local control that is retained by the destination and imposing cultural values that result in the dilution of traditional practices. It is argued by McLaren (2003) that due to the globalisation process, 'production everywhere will be focused on the needs of a single, Western monoculture, while indigenous cultures and diverse location-specific adaptations will be steadily erased. Local self-sufficiency will become an ever more distant memory,' clearly contrasting the ethos of sustainable development. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that globalisation may offer significant restrictions for the achievement of sustainable tourism development.

THE ECO-TOURISM DEBATE

There is further evidence at a more local level that sustainable tourism development can be shaped by dominant powers, reinforced by Pleumarom (March 1999 No. 103) who argues the limitations of sustainable development and attempts at sustainability addressed under the banner of 'ecotourism' as Western concepts being globalised, suggesting that these attempts at environmental preservation have, 'not necessarily served to preserve the environment and safeguard local communities' rights, but has been co-opted and distorted by official agencies and private industries for profit-making purposes.' Surely it is wrong to assume that the dominant first world powers are those best suited to provide guidance as to how a country's environmental, social and economic resources should best be managed? There is much material designed to contribute to the ecotourism debate. Whilst some commentators claim that ecotourism offers an eco-friendly, low impact alternative to mass tourism, aspects of which may be classed as sustainable, others suggest that ecotourism has led to the targeting of destination areas, previously untouched by the hand of tourism and the tourist, ecologically fragile areas, that are now subjected to visitor numbers, whilst perhaps low in comparison to that of mass tourism, are nevertheless greater than that previously experienced (De Chavez 1999, Pleumarom 1999, Kontogeorgopoulos 2005). Claims have been made that eco-tourism has been used as a marketing tool, rather than one of conservation, in order to charge higher rates for the experience and there are also claims of bio-piracy as an exploitative practice under the guise of eco-tourism (Pleumarom 1999).

One must furthermore acknowledge that there appears to be a continuum of eco-tourism levels (Poon 1993) between that of hard and soft eco-tourism activities and arguably, that of soft eco-tourism does not differ that greatly to traditional mass tourism having much evidence to suggest that

the impacts experienced by destinations characterized as eco-tourism may be severe, not only similar in nature to that of the impacts of mass tourism but greater so due to the fragility of the cultural and ecological environment of the destination area. Pleumarom (1999) reports that although eco-tourism in Asia is hailed as a 'flagship project' to encourage tourist expenditure, thus boosting the economy, ironically further loans and foreign investment are required in order to initiate such practices which increases the dependency upon global economies and results in a reduction of local power and economic independence, contrary to the principles of sustainable tourism development. A study by Kontogeorgopoulos (2005) has highlighted that, although some eco-tourism operators can offer real benefits such as local employment, social status mobility and incipient environmentalism, they may do so at the expense of the loss of local initiation and control, spatial isolation, social cohesion, and loss of ecological sustainability.

Effectiveness of other initiatives, reportedly concentrated on building a more 'sustainable' tourism product here in Thailand, in a similar manner to that of eco-tourism, may be questioned. An example of which lies in the alleged push towards the redesign of Koh Samet in Rayong Province and Koh Phi Phi in Krabi Province as a 'high end' resorts under the jurisdiction of DASTA (the Development Agency for Sustainable Tourism Areas) (As cited by Pleumarom 2006, taken from Bangkok Post 22.4.06 and The Nation 7.3.06). Proposals were made to develop both destinations under DASTA, Koh Phi Phi in particular following extensive destruction of infrastructure during the December 2004 Asian Tsunami. Nevertheless, both plans were cancelled due to significant resistance from local communities, under the belief that the plans would not satisfy community needs and would act as a floodgate for major outside investors, resulting in the gradual 'squeezing out' of the local business-owner. Ironically, residents of both destinations claim to have been satisfied with the existing tourism product and arguably the opening up of both destinations to powerful business interests, not originating in either destination, might result in a type of tourism where local control was lost, local needs were not recognised, local businesses were priced out of the market and significant economic leakage occurred, or in contrast, the economic power and corporate culture of these major corporations might result in the ability to practise considerate environmental policies, as is evidenced in such larger hotels as the Evason Six Senses Group; renowned for their strict environmental practices. This remains yet to be clarified.

CONCLUSION

In closing, to summarise; this paper has provided a background to the origins of sustainable tourism development, highlighting key areas of rationale for adoption. The paper's main focus however has encouraged the audience to question Western ideological discourse, suggesting that despite its benefits there appear many limitations associated with the adoption of sustainability principles to include the juxtaposition of definitions, implementation difficulties and the influence of power in shaping development. As identified by Tosun (2000) in his research surrounding sustainable Development in developing countries, 'any operation of principles of sustainable development necessitates hard political and economic choices, and decisions based upon complex socio-economic and environmental trade-offs'. These trade-offs appear to a greater extent to be shaped by not only the political economy within which the destination operates but also under the pressures of global political-economic forces. As reinforced within the WTO, Agenda 21, guidance for implementation, the ability to manage tourism sustainably is reliant upon numerous factors, yet to include, 'democratic legitimacy, permanence and ability to take a long term view' and economic policy (WTO). When referring back to the discussion surrounding the rationale for adoption, it may now become clear that sustainable tourism initiatives may not necessarily achieve all that is claimed but rather result from a power struggle of conflicting stakeholder interest within the realms of economic forces and increasingly important Globalisation, that unavoidably but perhaps understandably continue to shape development in Lesser Economically and Socially Developed Countries. Korten (1996) highlights that, 'increasingly, it is the corporate interest more than the human interest that defines policy agendas of states, although this reality and its implications have gone largely unnoticed and un-addressed.' This therefore presents opportunity for further study, which will be conducted through the author's PhD research. It appears that when considering the implementation of Sustainable Tourism Development there are numerous trade-offs that must take place and much conflict that must be overcome. On one hand we have the 'ideology' of a 'green paradigm' that is forcing development, in

contrast however, it appears that to achieve this type of development is restricted due to political-economic forces. Unfortunately, research would suggest that rather than enable communities to develop a form of tourism that is sustainable and allow them to yield the benefits of this industry, tourism is increasingly defined by those who exercise the greatest power (be that political or economic) over development.

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